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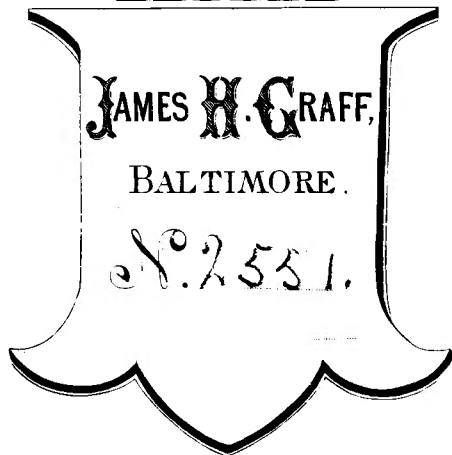
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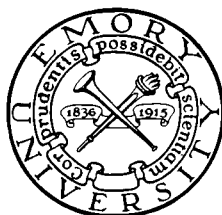
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LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS
THE BROADWAY, LUDGATE
NEW YORK: 416 BROOME STREET

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THE ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER.



CHAPTER I.

THE HOLTES OF ASTON HALL.

It was on the usual Thursday Market Day in Birmingham, in the year of grace 1642—if the term can be properly applied to the date of the commencement of the great Civil War of England. But, at all events, still at a time when market days were occasions of general gathering and movement in the towns and neighbourhoods where they were held—when Edward Holte, Esquire—eldest, and, indeed, only surviving legitimate son and heir presumptive of the worshipful Knight and Baronet, Sir Thomas Holte, of Aston Hall—rode into the town from the direction of that then not very long finished and magnificent specimen of English domestic architecture under the Stuarts.

This cavalier was apparently still a young man, though past the earliest flush of youth—the first blythe and bounding exultation, rather than mere enjoyment of existence, natural in the attainment of a healthy and high-blooded maturity of manhood. And such had, for ages, been as much a part of the inheritance of Edward Holte's race, as any of their numerous manors and other possessions scattered profusely in the neighbourhood of Birmingham. Or else peculiar circumstances had cast a shade of depression and melancholy over the features of this young man of five-and-twenty summers only, that would better have become the wintry side of life. Otherwise, his countenance was exceedingly handsome and engaging, from its expression of sentiment and intellect, mingled with an air of gentleness and refinement that spoke almost equally well for the qualities of mind and heart of their possessor.

It must be admitted that the lineage whence the heir of Aston sprang, needed some such variety in its exhibition of the kind of fruit from which the tree was to be known. For, from the time when a sturdy blacksmith of Birmingham founded the family by the strokes of the anvil—so the tradition ran—the Holtes of Erdington, Duddeston, and, finally, now of Aston Hall, had been renowned in their country for a

peculiarly haughty and masterful bearing, which was far from acquiring them the good will, or even respect, of their neighbours of the town.

On the contrary, it served to keep alive the memory of their origin, in the indignation inspired by the contrast of the sway and tyranny they assumed in their new position ; particularly with a people of such independent freedom of speech and action as the townsmen of Birmingham, who seemed to have acquired both from the ring and metal of their own forges. But the more ancient gentry and nobility of the country were long supposed, also, to regard with disfavour the forward pretensions and bustling arrogance of what was still looked upon as a new race, during a considerable portion of the two centuries and a half, in which it had been rising in wealth and possessions.

It was not found easy, however, to withstand the influence of these latter claims to distinction, backed as they mostly were, in the Holte generations, by personal qualities of an imposing and formidable description.

In particular, the representative of the family at the period of the seventeenth century alluded to, was considered, with some reason, to 'out-Herod' all the previous Herods of his race.

He had built a mansion which, in grandeur and expense of decoration, rivalled a princely palace, in the notions of the age. He had surrounded it by the enclosures of a park, which hemmed in the town in the direction its natural extension would most conveniently have pursued, besides depriving it of a tract of common land that had long been of use and recreation to the inhabitants. And, no longer satisfied with the rank of a country squire, achieved with difficulty by his ancestry, nor even with the honour of knighthood from the hands of his sovereign, Sir Thomas Holte had bought for himself one of the new hereditary titles, which excited at once the ridicule and indignation of the possessors of the ancient degrees of nobility. He was a *baronet* by purchase—and at a cost which, in those days, was held to be of fabulous enormity. But, in addition to all these offences, the new baronet was personally a man who appeared to combine in his attributes all the least popular and commendable qualities of his progenitors. He was said to be of an extraordinarily violent and tyrannical character, and report figured him as living in his stately seclusion at Aston Hall, more in the style of an Eastern despot than a modern English gentleman—with all his family and vassalage trembling around him.

To be sure, the place where these reports were most believed in, and possibly invented, was very unfavourably disposed to the Holtes in general. Aston Hall and Birmingham had been at feud almost from the laying of the first stone of the building, so close upon it, till now, when it towered in all its pride and novel splendour, and seemed to rebuke the mechanical genius of the town by its displays of consequential gentility.

Like a proper English country squire, besides, Sir Thomas Holte rigorously preserved the game on his lands, and on the Crown wastes of Sutton Coldfield, of which he was Ranger. On the other hand, the bold and hungry commonalty of the town were irresistibly tempted by the joy of forbidden sport, and the sight of the fat bucks, pheasants, and

wild ducks that were in such plenty over the whole territory in question, to acts of depredation and spoil. These were resented in the most vigorous manner by the Aston baronet : and as he was in the commission of the peace, and enjoyed numerous far more arbitrary privileges and powers as a royal officer of the chase, he was often enabled to visit chastisements on the aggressors, the severity of which secured him an amount of bitter ill-will seldom attained by any private individual. And now, to crown all, the great division and quarrel of the English people, as a nation, found the baronet and his ingenious artificer neighbours at complete issue and variance on all the main points in the dispute.

Possibly it would have been enough for the lower orders of the townspeople of Birmingham to have known which side Sir Thomas Holte had embraced, to range them on the opposite one. But, like nearly all the larger rising towns of England at the time, not dependent on the soil, but engaged in commerce or the mechanical arts, Birmingham had adopted with eagerness and enthusiasm the new ideas, both in policy and religion, that had long been spreading in secret among the masses of the people.

A sturdy love and maintenance of personal freedom had ever, indeed, been remarked as native-born and habitual in the feelings and habits of Birmingham men. And doctrines so congenial to their natural tastes and instincts, as were now universally diffused from the great centre of English public opinion, found a more than ready acceptance among them. Birmingham, in consequence, vehemently adhered to the cause of the Parliament, when the time for declaration arrived, against the vacillating and yet headstrong efforts of Charles the First to change the constitution of his kingdoms into a despotism—while equally, as a matter of course, Sir Thomas Holte took sides in the quarrel with a sovereign of so similar a character and views.

Not to mention that Sir Thomas was under personal obligations and service to his Prince, it was highly necessary for a *parvenu* baronet, who aspired to complete his grandeur and elevation by a loftier title of nobility, to show a marked zeal and forwardness in the support he lent to his sovereign's cause, now that it was cast on the last arbitrament of the sword. For the King, having retired—or, rather, having been driven—from London to York, had for some time been assembling an army, under whose protection he proposed to raise his royal standard, and advance to the overthrow and chastisement of the rebellious Parliament ; while the Parliament, on its part, marshalled the Londoners and the rest of its partisans into a host likely to render the enterprise of great doubt and difficulty in the execution.

A personage of such a character and demeanour in external relations, as those ascribed to Sir Thomas Holte, was not likely to prove a very kind or indulgent father and master of a family ; and domestic discomfort of this sort might have had something to do with the pensive and sorrowful cast of expression observable in the looks of the young heir of Aston. But reports were also afloat that Master Holte—as he was called—and his father differed considerably in their notions on public affairs.

Both were, indeed, royalists, in the main stamp of opinion ; but they were not so well agreed in the quality and degrees of their adherence to the cause thus embraced.

Despotic and overbearing in his personal tastes, Sir Thomas Holte was all for the high-handed exercise of power and authority, and talked of nothing but riding up to the saddle-bows in the blood of those plebeian traitors and contemners of lawful dominion who had exalted their horns in the London Parliament. His son—perhaps from practical experience of the effects of uncontrolled power—was an advocate for milder measures, and a reconciliation which should compose differences, without exalting or depressing either great balancing power in the State to the destruction of the other.

Edward Holte had been the bosom friend of the accomplished and generous Falkland at the University, and, like him, had hoped on against hope to the last, that means might be found to reconcile the contending factions at a less price than a torrent of English blood, poured forth by English hands. But the hatred and exasperation of parties had now passed all such saving limits ; or the rash elation and conceit of the Royalists, at having the person and still venerated majesty of the royal name engaged on their side, no longer permitted a hearing to moderate counsels.

The stern old man at Aston was not likely to be the last to share in the rising furor of determination on the part of his faction ; and, as the Holtes very seldom went into Birmingham for their pleasure, it was a probable supposition, now that the baronet had imposed his own energetic will and resolves upon the milder and more submissive genius of his heir, that Master Holte was in the town on business connected with the arming of the Aston tenantry on the side of the King.

It was, at all events, very well known in Birmingham that King Charles's commission of array had arrived in Warwickshire, and was being put into execution by the zeal of the principal country gentlemen ; though the Lord-Lieutenant, Lord Brooke, taking part with the Parliament, refused all assistance : and that, among the leading spirits on the King's behalf, Sir Thomas Holte was exhibiting extraordinary zeal. According to the report, he was forming the chief of the able-bodied yeomen on his estates into a body of horse, under the command of his son.

Only heir and lawful representative of the name, as young Edward Holte remained, his sire seemed not to grudge the exposure of his life in the bloody game about to be played. But, probably, like the greater part of the Royalist faction, at the time—elate with the pride and presumption of birth and territorial possession—Sir Thomas thought the struggle with the ' rascally mobs ' that backed the Parliament, would be brief, and dangerous only to the ' citizen and rabble routs,' which were believed to form its main dependence. Among these, pillage and massacre were speedily to do their worst, in the calculations of civil hatred and revenge, in which aristocratic contempt and notions of superiority, natural to the class that for so many ages alone wielded the sword, largely mingled.

The Holtes, it is certain, would have sought in vain for recruits among

the townsfolk of Birmingham ; but the agricultural population, as a rule, implicitly followed the will and pleasure of the landlords and other ancient masters and leaders of their class ; and the large landed possessions of the family placed means of influence in this respect at his disposal, which it could not be doubted the Aston Baronet was very well inclined to exert.

CHAPTER II.

BIRMINGHAM 221 YEARS AGO.

IT was evident Edward Holte's business lay in no degree with the principal cause of that day's assemblage in the town. He scarcely bestowed a glance on the trains of market goods, and merchandise of various descriptions, slowly lumbering past him in carts, or on the backs of weary, spavined horses, which, tottering under piles of loaded sacks, performed such portion of the labour of the railway and canal of our day, as was needed by the much inferior demands of traffic and manufacture in that.

Then, as now, the 'Black Country' forwarded, as to a central unloading place, the products of its darksome industry, chiefly in small tumbril carts, to suit the narrow, deeply-sunk roads, into Birmingham ; in several of which, up to a much later period, a load of straw, piled till it nearly overbalanced the carriage, scarcely showed above the edges of the way. And the leather-clad, sooty-faced attendants on this needful supply to the forges of Birmingham—already famous, time out of historic memory, for the productions it now furnishes to the entire world—it was plain, examined with no very friendly attention the general figure and appearance of the young cavalier. And, if his broad plumed hat—his flowing bright brown curls—his fine features and graceful bearing—his riding cloak of mulberry-coloured velvet—his richly embroidered collar, high boots, and gold rowelled spurs—excited their admiration, as a display of the polish of civilised life—these gnomes of the coal mine seemed rather disposed to express the feelings awakened, in coarse and gibing remarks, not unfrequently akin to open insult and ribaldry.

The latter form of salute was, it is true, chiefly directed against the two well-mounted and well armed domestics of Aston. Their scarlet livery coats, as serving men, distinguished by the squirrel badge of the Holtes, seemed in particular to excite notice and ill-will, the more especially as they took every opportunity to return jeer for jeer, and rough practical joke for joke, as they dashed along in attendance on their master. Indeed, it required, more than once, a considerable display of patience and dexterity on the part of the young gentleman, to avoid some uncomfortable collision or dispute with these Black Country folk, whose vehicles had, in several places, almost complete possession of the road. And, though accustomed from his childhood to legends of the wild manners and hardy independence of these people, Edward acknowledged to himself, with a sigh, that the signs of an altered and democratic age appeared in the increased sturdiness and disdain of all

former admitted pretensions to social superiority, he had now so ample occasion to remark.

Birmingham was a very different town in its external aspects, in 1642, to what it presents at the present day:

It was a manufacturing town, it is true, and had been so from the earliest ages of English history. It enjoyed almost a unique reputation in England for all the arts of Tubal Cain—all the products of the bellows and the forge. But its size was not in any proportion to its renown; and, had not the whole mass of the inhabitants been engaged in the staple industry of the place, it would be difficult to imagine how it could have supplied the wants even of scattered and unpopulous communities, like those of England—and of Europe in general—at the time.

Instead of a population of 290,000 living souls, Birmingham reckoned scarcely 6,000.

Fifteen streets and nine hundred houses lodged this population, according to the lively, but, perhaps, too imaginative local historian, Hutton. Equal to the demand, certainly, even if Birmingham had already acquired its sensible liking for space and separation into families that now distinguishes it. But the lofty chimneys, towering like the burning genii of the place, in an Arabian tale, did not yet exhibit their sombre majesty over a sea of murky smoke and cloud. The smithies, scarcely raised above the general run of two storied houses, and chiefly confined to the lower portion of the town, sent forth their temperate volumes of sooty vapour, each from its separate range of open timber-work, to the streets. Everywhere else, Birmingham presented the aspect of a quiet country town, reposing in the midst of fields and woodlands, not yet stripped of vegetation and verdure by the flaming breath of a thousand furnaces.

From Aston Park, a succession of fields and orchards occupied almost all the space now covered with a tangled maze of streets and habitations, to Gosta Green and Newhall Street. As yet, St. Philip's was not; and only a part of Bull Street. At the Welsh Cross, Edward Holte might be said first to find himself in the town. Then, traversing the long, irregular High Street, he came upon that broad triangular space sloping downward to the Church of St. Martin, from time immemorial used as the market-place of Birmingham.

The rider's glance caught, almost unconsciously, the summit of the beautiful spire of this edifice, rising in airy elegance over the mingled and bustling scene below, and yet sinking so singularly from all the lines of approach. Edward was absorbed in thought, and this was too customary an object to break his reverie.

Neither might anything equally wonted in the market-day aspect of the enclosure he now traversed, have disturbed it. The lines of open booths all round the churchyard walls, displaying most of the hardware products of Birmingham—each attended as salesman by the brawny artist himself, who troubled no middleman with the task; the orderly ranges of carts, containing the vegetable produce of the surrounding districts, set back to back, like the chariots of a British encampment, down the centre of the space; the bellowing herds of kine and oxen, penned in movable hurdles before the shambles for which they were

destined ; but allotted, by our humaner ancestors, in that respect, plentiful food and troughs of water, during the intermediate stages of bargain and sale ; the rows of ruddy farmers along the Corn Cheaping, as it was called, disdaining not to stand by their open sacks of barley, wheat, and rye ; and presenting sample and bulk together to the purchaser—the steeds bestriden to market by these worthies, being tethered by the bridle before the doors of the numerous inns, which paraded the most curious ensigns—not merely names—without need of a licence, wherever the eye glanced round the thick enclosure of low-roofed, carved gable end houses.

All this had nothing striking or unusual in it for Edward Holte.

Neither the Market Cross itself, which formed a conspicuous object in the scene to strangers, being an old Saxon sculpture of a crucifixion, elevated on a flight of granite steps, the whole worn almost to shapelessness by time and exposure—nor the well-accustomed apparition of the Bailiff of Birmingham (Birmingham being at the period only the appendage of a feudal lordship) sitting, as it were, enthroned in an old carved oak chair, just below the cross ; garbed in a worm-eaten antique costume of coloured quarterings, resembling a herald's sleeveless coat or tabard.

This functionary—a fat, jolly-looking man, with a corporation that might have supplied the town's lack of one—was undignified enough to be fast asleep at the moment, *coram populo*, and even snoring aloud. But nobody heeded him. And yet he had a row of stocks behind him, and a banner waved over him from a gibbet, to denote the Lord's right (long disused) of inflicting *capital punishment* on offenders within the jurisdiction of the manor, the Justiciary besides being attended by four or five officials of inferior rank, with scales and measures, whose occupation was probably not so completely gone.

Antique feudal customs of all kinds were still in too general vogue to excite any special wonder, even in a philosophical student of his age like Edward Holte. Yet—proceeding in deep thought, as he was—he could not avoid being struck, a little further on in his advance, by the aspect of a portion of the crowded resort he had now come upon.

This was a part of the enclosure of dwelling-houses on the eminence directly facing the Church of St. Martin, which, at a time when the barbarous pastime of bull-baiting was a favourite amusement of the English populace everywhere, received a name from the practice—extended to the entire space, in the end.

The tortured animal was chained for the 'sport' to a massive iron ring, fixed by a staple in a block of stone in the rough pavement of cobble-stones. And this was universally known in Birmingham as the Bull Ring.

But now, around the spot dedicated to this cruel recreation, a remarkable group was collected, evidently for a very different object. Indeed, this group might be said at the moment to take in the entire motley assemblage.

It was chiefly composed of artisans, the country people in general standing aloof, though sharing in the general attention—skilful men in most of the manufactures practised at the time in Birmingham—

workers in iron and in brass, and in the more precious metals ; in leather and in steel—armourers of all kinds—defensive and offensive—makers of swords, daggers, pikes, pistols, and carbines, and fashioners of the plates of polished metal still used to cover the body from the assaults of these instruments, and adapted to its configuration with extraordinary skill—dyers, glassmen, bellows-makers, were here collected, together with representatives of all the innumerable varieties of ingenious craftsmen who at this day are said to work in the 'toy trade' of Birmingham.

The business of marketing which had collected this throng was evidently, however, not the one at present commanding the general attention, directed in the quarter mentioned. The ordinary chaffering and clatter of a scene of activity of the kind was lulled, and on all sides notice seemed absorbed in a single speaker. Women and children were among the most eager and engaged listeners, where listening appeared to be the universal business. And, glancing forward with surprised attention Edward Holte beheld a figure addressing this numerous audience, that certainly, and not lightly, aroused his own curiosity and interest.

It was that of a man of middle age; of low stature, and naturally of slender and delicate proportions in his limbs, whose fleshy covering had been so much further reduced, seemingly by privations, that he now presented little more than the skeleton framework of a human being. His features were particularly fine and chiselled in the outline ; and the forehead, which was expansive, though a little too suddenly thrown back, would have possessed a character of great benevolence and intellect, but for the frenzied glare of the expression overspreading the whole countenance. This was besides ghastly pale in the complexion, and deformed with strange, letter-shaped gashes, that gave him something of the appearance of a Feejee savage, decorated with the emblems of cannibal chieftaincy. But the terrible expression that shone over it was chiefly due to the eyes, which glowed with such a lustre of passion and distempered fervour of meaning, as to a calm looker-on appeared nigh akin to, if not quite, insanity. The long shaggy grey hair seemed as if it had not been combed for years, and was tossed back like the main of a horse, revealing also a pair of slit and mutilated ears.

As for the garb of this wild figure, it was scarcely equal to the requirements of decency, the chief part of it consisting of a loose kilt of sack-cloth, scarcely reaching to his knees from the shoulders. The feet were naked and bleeding, and the crouched and distorted knees and ankles still visibly bore the marks of fetters, and attested great need of the long staff he held, curiously branched at the end so as to resemble an outstretched gigantic hand.

From these signs, Edward Holte was not slow to form the conclusion that he beheld one of what had of late years become a very numerous wandering corps—a fanatic enthusiast, who had suffered from the persecutions of the established powers in Church and State. Traces of the pillory and of the pelting of a Royalist mob, were unmistakably visible in every line of the poor man's misused visage, but the letters stamped into it were the true handwriting of the merciless Archbishop Laud, and attested that the victim had been branded as a R. (ogue) and a S. (chismatic)

by the hand of the executioner, all which decidedly graced the sufferer with the honours of martyrdom, and accounted for the half-maddened state of mind he exhibited both in looks and words.

Aware that these representatives of persecution were among the most formidable signs of the time, Edward reined up his horse behind a group of the auditory, to take some note of what might be the subject of a discourse that commanded so much attention. His own arrival remained, for awhile, quite unmarked in the superior absorption of men's minds—and it is certain that, after listening for a few moments, he was no longer surprised at this centralisation of notice.

'Why marvel ye at my words, gazing at me as at one who hath no warrant or authority for the terrors of God's judgment, which I have thus declared among ye, unless ye, too, take warning in time, and "flee from the wrath to come?"' the enthusiast was shrieking forth, at the pitch of a shrill but piercing and powerful voice. 'Is it because that, of a truth, I have declared unto ye that of myself I am nothing—even as dust in the balance of the scales of the world? For what am I by birth? A wretched foundling, discovered wallowing in Fleet Ditch, in London city, where it had been flung by a murderous mother, as a loathsome and abhorred offscum of guilt and shame! What by trade or occupation? Even a poor tailor, who had no skill at his work, and was discharged of all bread and employment for not having wit sufficient to thread the eye of a needle or follow a chalking on cloth with the shears! But HE respecteth not persons, and out of the mouth of babes and sucklings I'll perfecteth praise! Worthless worm of the earth as I am, He chose me forth as one that should turn on the heel of the oppressor, and witness to His truth before the scoffer and despiser of the Word, seated in the highest place! See ye not the seal of the testimony burned into the flesh of my face, because, having heard the call of the trumpet, even in my lowliest and most dismal estate, wandering afar in the desert—yea, standing shivering, in starvation and rags, on mighty London's bridge, and meditating whether or no to seek some way through the houses to overleap into the river, and end mine earthly miseries—I forthwith girded up my loins, and answering, 'Yea, Lord, I am here,' accepted the commission wherewith I was then and there charged!—which was, to preach everywhere, throughout the length and breadth of England, the coming of the true kingdom of Christ upon the earth, before which all other powers and dominations thereof shall pass away, even as the glory of the sun devours the blaze of torch and taper! The reign of a thousand years of the Saints around the Lamb, where sin and pain and grief and death shall be unknown, and a joy of purity, even as a river of milk, shall encompass all the land!

'This did I, through good report and ill report; whether the people received me with bread or with stones: until such times as the fame of my testimony coming to the ears of that minor Beelzebub, of some styled Laud, Pope of London, I was had before him at Lambeth; and, persisting in the truth, was given over to the tormentors! But quailed my heart in the furnace? Melted my soul within me at the gnashing of the teeth of the lions. Of a surety, no; though for awhile I shook the dust of London city off my feet, and wandered up and down the length

and breadth of the land, declaring everywhere the breaking of the dawn ! How came I else in Nottingham Castle keep, where, for contumacy, as they called it, which was in truth obedience to God, rather than to man, I have groaned in captivity for eleven endless years of days and nights ? For so long a season hath the man Charles—the most hateful and accursed of all his hateful and accursed race—given his sceptre as a rod into the hands of the persecutors, and bidden them smite and spare not.

‘But what saw I there—even there—through the rusty bars of my dungeon, in the high tower of that strong-hold of mercilessness and desolation ?’ the haranguer continued with yet heightened passion and vehemence. ‘Lo, now ! I saw the upraising of the standard of the tyrant on the loftiest battlemented summit above me, amidst the blare of trumpets, the thunder of cannon, and the shouts of triumph of the armed men of Satan and Belial, thronging all the heights below. But, behold ! hardly was it raised, when a blast of the fierce wind of God’s indignation seized and rent into rags the ensign of blood, with all its pagan decorations of butchery, horned beasts, and usurped crowns ! Yea, even tore up the pole it was planted upon—tall as the foremast of a mighty ship of war—and flung it headlong over the battlements from all its shrieking gear, even as a child of ten years tears up a hazel wand and tosses it laughing to the winds, stripped of all its flutter and leaf of twig !

‘Myself, I saw it !’ the excited speaker continued. ‘With these eyes I beheld the plain manifestation of the judgment of Heaven against the tyrant, who then and there set up his standard of war and destruction against the people of England. And I saw the dismay that pierced the hearts of the malignants when they beheld what had happened ; and how even the stern proud man of blood and wrath himself grew pale—paler than the whiteness of his tossing plume ! I saw, and I yelled forth, Joy ! joy ! until the angry, clouded skies rang again with the utterance ; and the tyrant himself asked what shriek that was—not human, and yet that seemed so—which ran up and down the castle steeps of Nottingham to his ears ? And they were fain to tell him, to comfort him, that I was a *lunatic* ; confined for the cause of lunacy and that alone, in Nottingham Castle jail !

‘But now that I am an angel, or messenger, well approved of Him that is at hand—listen, and believe !’ The enthusiast went on to announce himself ; and, in truth, drawing up his meagre and exhausted form into an attitude almost sublime in its energy of self-assertion. ‘Lo ! haughty Rehoboam’s heart was molten within him with terror, and his knees slackened when he heard mine eagle-yelling of exultation night and day in the keep above his castle crags ; and the Lord so wielded him as an instrument to his purpose that, although many about him—and chiefly the young man of blood whom they call Prince Palatine, and who thirsts as a hungry lion for the blood of the faithful people of God—would fain have had him put me to death without further trial or demand, as one guilty, of old, of unpardonable felony and relapse, the man Charles would not have it so, but ordered simply that I should be taken from my captivity and cast forth of the town, to wend my way whither and how I might.

'And now, of a truth, I declare unto ye I was sorely minded, and pressed to take my way to London to enquire after my wife and children, whether they were dead or no : which, for eleven years, I know not, being secluded from all sight of them—of every living face of man, saving my gaolers, and almost of the glorious sun of day, which is the life of the flesh and of the world. Though why speak I of them, or that, since in recompense I was blessed with many great and beauteous visions and revelations of marvellous mercies and deliverances in store for the God-fearing people of this land, and ever-memorable age of time? But it might not be. For, moreover, a Voice spoke unto me, as I tottered forth into Nottingham woods to feed my hunger, even as the birds and wildlings of the air, on haws and berries, but knelt first for direction, saying, "Go not to London, go not to London. What are thy wife and children to thee in comparison with the work in hand? And yet, tarry no longer in this country ; but hasten on to the good and godly town of Birmingham, where be the most potent workers and welders in iron and steel and brass of all the living men in the world, and bid them prepare the armour and weapons of carnal trust for the men of the sword, whom the Lord shall raise in his appointed time, to do him right on his adversaries! This shall you bid them do, as they would shun the wrath at hand!" Not the wrath of the kings of the earth, who usurp the throne of Jesus ; nor of the blood-thirsty myrmidons of kings and prelates, who are assembling round the usurper at Nottingham! FLEE FROM THE WRATH OF THE KING OF KINGS, I say unto you, whom, unless ye aid to raise up and place in the supremacy of the world, the Angel of the Seals shall break the last against you, and the vials of destruction be poured forth as a consuming torrent of liquid fire among ye! Look at your furnaces, O ye men of Birmingham, and consider what that shall be!

'As for me, I have spoken ; I have delivered my soul. They who found me wallowing in Fleet Ditch mire called me, in memory of my deliverance, Flotsam. When I preached the glory of the thousand years at hand, I was everywhere called Kingdom-Come Flotsam. But when I stood in the pillory before the palace of the tyrant, and was reviled and pelted of his soldiers, I determined to call myself, in perpetual memory thereof, until the horn of deliverance should sound, *Wrath-of-God Whitehall!* So call me henceforth among ye, for I will abide here awhile unto the perfectness of the work, when I will declare truly who and what I am. For I am not what I seem ; nor know I myself well yet WHO or WHAT I am. But the beginning must be before the end, and the abomination of desolation sit first in the place. Only this I say unto ye without parable : the day and the hour are at hand, and the text must go forth as the breath of the desert consuming a path—"Without shedding of blood there is no remission," Heb. ix. 22.

With this strangely perverted scriptural quotation the speaker paused, but evidently in exhaustion, rather of his physical powers, than of his wish to prolong the exhortation ; for he continued wildly grasping in the air with his disengaged right hand, and muttering and foaming at the lips for some time longer ; while the multitude, gazing at him,

evidently in astonishment and awe, broke also into a confused murmur, that sounded to Edward Holte like an accompaniment of prayer.

CHAPTER III.

TUBAL BROMYCHAM.

EDWARD was aware, in common with other royalist gentlemen, whose immediate exertions had been called upon in the Midland Counties, that it was the King's intention to raise his royal standard at Nottingham, and assemble his army around him there. But he had not yet heard of the actual completion of the design, so slowly did news travel in those days, unless when winged by the zeal of such partizanship as was exhibited by the released fanatic, who had witnessed the accident that had thereupon befallen. It grieved him much to hear tell of so disastrous an omen, as he was well aware it would be considered by even his own party; the effect on the opposite one needed no further interpretation.

The heir of Aston had also long been aware that the inhabitants of Birmingham were suspected of some strong, though secret, adherence to the new doctrines in religion and civil policy which had become prevalent. But he was not prepared for so general and vehement a tendency of opinion as now became manifest in the excited throng. The country people attending the market, still, indeed, gaped aloof, with a mixture of ridicule and stolid wonder in their ruddy looks. But the townspeople—and especially those workers in mighty metals who were so emphatically addressed—seemed to respond with answering frenzy, 'He is inspired of God!' Many muttered, withdrawing their brawny arms from under their seared leather aprons, 'Let him tell us what to do, and we will do it!'

One young lad of the throng took Edward Holte's attention rather particularly.

Perhaps he had no fair claim to be reckoned among the craftsmen of the town; for, by his gait and general appearance, he was neither more nor less than a wandering tinker. His lithe and flowing limbs, his sparkling, audacious eyes, his dissipated and vagabond aspect, seemed, in truth, to speak of gipsy blood and habits. But even this wild youth was taken with the prevailing contagion, and Edward remarked that he shook and trembled all over, as if taken with a convulsion fit, and finally burst into a passion of tears; and, in the language of his own immortal vision at a subsequent period (for it was the young John Bunyan of the future 'Pilgrim's Progress'), 'Not being able longer to contain, he broke out with a lamentable cry, saying, "What shall I do? What shall I do to save myself from this wrath that is coming upon us all?"'

'Ay, master, tell us that! What shall we do?' enquired another spectator of the group just before Edward Holte, in a voice so strong and deep-toned that it resembled the bass notes of a church organ. But it was now hoarse and vibrating with emotion,

Struck with the utterance, Edward glanced at the speaker. What he saw removed his surprise at such a power and volume of sound. The voice came from the broad chest of a figure which might best be described as that of a stunted giant, it was so massive and developed in everything but stature; in consequence, it seemed likely, of too early and severe labour in a compressed posture—possibly in a coal mine—though the brawny bare arms and grimy visage now betokened one who had changed the toils of the mine for those of the forge. Nevertheless, he was still a young man, about the age of Edward Holte. In other respects, the square, strong-moulded head, clustered all over with wiry chestnut curls, the well-cut features, the firm compressed lips, the ruddy complexion, indicated great energy of will and character, and marked unusual purity of Saxon descent. On the other hand, the emotion visible in the countenance, the tears quivering in the bright blue eyes, indicated a susceptibility to impressions and tenderness of nature hardly to be looked for in so virile and powerful an outward conformation.

‘What shall we do, I say?’ this artificer repeated, with a kind of musical roar in the vehemence of his accents. ‘I, for one, am ready—for anything!’

Wrath-of-God Whitehall rolled his eyes with a still wilder glare over the excited multitude, whose excitement added fearfully to his own, for actual fire seemed to flash from them.

‘What shall ye do?’ he yelled, as if himself puzzled by the question for a moment—but only for a moment. ‘Will ye obey me? and I will speak,’ he resumed. ‘Begin by pulling down the images of Baal and Dagon throughout the land! Down with this idolatrous Pagan figure of hewn stone, which Time has not been able to destroy! But the patience of God is exhausted now at last, and He is a-weary of the slow teeth of that dog of the centuries to destroy! Down with this popish and idolatrous Crucifixion, I say, which usurps the living presence of the Lord! Aye, and with all that defend it!’

The maddened zealot pointed, as he spoke, to the almost shapeless Market Cross, around which the Bailiff and his officers had now arisen, with evident marks of consternation.

‘By cock and pix! I should like nothing better than a tussle with the Bailiff and his men, who sit for a lord of the manor who hath stolen from me mine inheritance!’ exclaimed the dwarfed young giant, with a joyful shout and clapping of his nervy hands.

But this zeal received a sudden rebuke.

‘Peace, Tubal Bromycham! peace! Hath not my father reproved you a thousand times for making yourself ever thus foremost in a fray? And are you not now here solely to aid and assist me, his daughter, in my marketing?’ interposed a female voice, whose bright and vivacious accents formed a singular contrast to the solemn murmuring around. Something also of the coquettish and imperious, announcing the spoilt beauty, naturally drew male attention in the direction. Edward Holte looked, and saw what riveted his attention for awhile.

There stood a young woman almost immediately before him, probably in her eighteenth year; all the formality, and one might say quakeress-like simplicity, of whose garb could not disguise the perfect grace and

swelling modulations of her youthful form. Nor did the close-drawn brown cloth hood she wore do more than cast into a pleasing shade the bright rosiness and beauty of her countenance, framed, as it were, in a glossy profusion of raven-black flowing hair. Brilliant hazel eyes, and a lovely dimpling of the plump peachy cheeks, further fascinated the cavalier's observation ; and the degree of bravery and challenge implied in this public speaking, so unusual among women at that time, had a peculiarly piquant effect, in association with so much feminine charm and fascination of outward appearance.

The curiosity and admiration expressed in the glance Edward Holte turned upon this rare young creature was meanwhile not lost upon her. He perceived her colour rise, but there was also a degree of startled query and recognition in the glance she flashed upon him, and then away, which awakened his own reminiscences.

But he had no time to consider much. The young fellow who had been reproved exclaimed, in a vexed and discomfited tone, 'Here I am, then, Mistress Firebrace, with my panniers ! But, if I mistake not, it was yourself, good mistress, stopped first to witness how this wrestler with the devil would throw and trample the old blackamoor !'

Speaking thus, Tubal Bromycham, as he seemed to be called—who, from what passed, appeared to be an artificer, employed in the forge of some master smith of the town, whose housekeeping daughter he had been appointed to attend, probably in the capacity of porter, for which his evident extraordinary strength well qualified him—flourished aloft two large baskets on his arms, and moved as if to hustle his way after his young mistress through the crowd. But, of a sudden, the lean, long hand of the fanatic apostle was laid upon his shoulder, and 'Halt, I command thee !' he shouted, and indeed in an accent that might have arrested the march of an army. 'Is this a woman of Moab in the garb of one of the pure ones of Canaan ? Hast thou put thy hand to the plough, young man of sinew and brawn ! and wilt thou now draw back ? No, of a truth, no, thou shalt not ! I mark thee forth from this hour as a Goliath in the cause of Israel ! Or if thy name be Tubal—which is of a godly and scriptural sense—keep and deserve it by devoting all the skill and power wherewith God has endowed thee to work out the great deliverance ! Lo ! I, speaking with authority, command thee at once to throw down the burdens with which thou art laden, even as Issachar, an ass between two masterful oppressions, and fall to the work for which thy might was given thee. Rend down, root up, cast away, I say—and let all who hear, hear !—this pagan, popish image, set up for idolatry of old times among ye !'

Apparently enthralled by the power and solemnity of this address, the young blacksmith, as he seemed to be, tossed his baskets frantically up in the air, like hoops from a girl's wands, though they were partly filled with market goods ; and, heedless where they fell, drew his leather girdle tight around his waist, and shouted to the people : 'Lend hands, then, men of Birmingham, for surely it would shame ye to see one at the work alone ; though, on such encouragement, meseems I could lift St. Martin's Church !'

An uproarious shout responded, and Tubal Bromycham, bursting his

way with the strength and violence of an ox rushing from the goad, swept upwards towards the Market Cross, with a goodly retinue of the shouters in his train.

‘They are bent on mischief; but be not alarmed, Mistress Firebrace—as I learn is your name. I have business, precisely at this time, in the town with your respected father, the armourer, Zachariah Firebrace, and I shall feel proud and most happy to be permitted to be your escort in safety home,’ said Edward Holte, alighting from his horse to be of more efficient countenance and protection to the fair Puritan, who now looked evidently distressed, if not alarmed.

‘I thank you, sir—even a thousand times I thank you. But that poor foolish youth, whom my father looks upon as his right hand at the forge, what is he about?’ replied the maiden, gazing after her deserting attendant. ‘Ah me! he will get himself and the whole town into trouble and outlawry with the Crown, whose officers the Bailiff and his men are! And all the world knows what evil comes of that mostly, unless the world is turned upside down shortly! And no one should understand that better than poor Tubal himself, who, but for the strong hand of unjust authority, instead of a working man for wage as he is in Birmingham, should be its lord paramount and chief!’

Edward Holte rapidly called to mind, as he listened to these words, a too well-known story of an act of perfidious tyranny which had disgraced the reign of Edward VI., with regard to a family of the name of Birmingham, belonging to that place, or rather to whom the place belonged; for it was doubtful whether they had given a name, or derived one, from *Bromycham*, as the town’s was mostly pronounced at that time by the inhabitants. So ancient was the dominion, as lords of the manor, of the family of Birmingham, but who had been deprived of all their extensive estates and rights in it, by an act of mingled treachery and violence almost incredible, even in the most barbarous ages; by a feigned process of law and justice certainly, but which only added the baseness of hypocrisy and betrayal to the most cruel tyranny and spoliation. Unhappily, Edward Holte also called to mind at the instant that one of his own ancestors—found a fitting instrument of unjust power—had figured with no light share in the perfidy and wickedness of the transaction.

But it was not a time for much reflection on the subject.

‘There is no means of hindrance for their madness that I can espy at hand, Mistress Firebrace,’ he observed, after following, with a brief gaze, the tumultuous onset of the crowd, ‘though, if you think it can be of any use for myself and servants to interfere in aid of the Bailiff and his officers, whose duty it is to preserve the peace of the town—’

‘No, good troth, no! I would not have you, of all madneses, step between these wild people and their will!’ the fair Puritan interrupted him to observe, her anxiety appearing suddenly to shift its object. ‘The Bailiff himself is not the man, believe me, to run needless risk. See, he makes no resistance, nor even show of it, but turns his face and flees, with his officers at his back. They will make, no doubt, for the moated manor-house of the lordship, where, if they have but courage left to raise the drawbridge, none can follow them. But yonder is Tubal, tear-

ing and rending at the old statue with a mad giant's strength and recklessness, as if he could tear up an oak by the roots. But 'tis too well fixed in its base. Hark ! one calls for crowbars ; the tinker supplies his poker. And now, do but listen to the strokes of Tubal at the base of the statue ! Do but look and see how the fire flashes from every blow he gives the solid stone, as if it were from the strokes of the anvil ! Let us hence, let us hence, fair sir,' the young girl concluded, turning to the cavalier with an expression in which it was impossible to avoid discerning a lively interest, 'for if I am right in believing you are one of the honourable Holtes of Aston Hall, there is no knowing whither their frenzy may proceed under such guidance ! Perchance you know it not, but your house is little loved or cherished in our town !'

'I am not afraid, gentle mistress, of a rascally mob like this, who are only valiant where they are not resisted. I and my servants are well armed ; but I do not desire to enter rashly into collision with your angry townspeople at this time ; I have quite another object in Birmingham. In good time these people will be punished, I nothing doubt, to the top of their deserts ; but, meanwhile,' Edward Holte concluded, with a smile, 'I should be tempted rather to scramble a few coins among this rabble, as a reward for removing so unsightly an eyesore from the only goodly open space in the town.'

'But you do not know—no one of your faction—no one at Aston, I would say—Master Holte, knows what manner of humour the townspeople of Birmingham are now possessed of ; and they are not a people to be made a jest of in their wrath. Let us hence, if your kindness really would protect me safely to my home !' the lovely Puritan replied, with increasing anxiety, amidst the groaning uproar of blows and shouts. But it was pleasingly evident to Edward himself that her solicitude was chiefly on his account.

It could scarcely be otherwise. Mistress Firebrace had little reason for apprehension on her own account, from a mob led on by one of her father's principal artisans, and who was besides more than suspected of a devoted personal attachment to herself ; not to mention that her father was one of the most wealthy and respectable inhabitants of Birmingham, and of great influence in the place, on account of his known attachment to the popular and puritan opinions which had of latter times gained the complete ascendancy in it.

'Let us leave them to their work, then : they will find it as tough a job as Birmingham has often mastered, for this statue seems fixed by the men who set up the Red Horse in the Vale of Edgehill,' observed Edward, affecting a gaiety which perhaps he did not altogether feel. Then, turning from the noisy and uproarious scene around the mutilated image, which, in spite of all the efforts directed at it, now under the yelling exhortations of Wrath-of-God Whitehall himself, showed no signs of yielding, the cavalier offered his hand with graceful courtesy to Mistress Firebrace's acceptance.

'We shall run the less risk of separation,' he said, with a smile that grew in warmth of admiration the nearer he surveyed the fair Puritan's charming countenance. 'One of my knaves can lead my horse, and the

other gather up your merchandise, and follow with the baskets. Ho ! Joscelin and Humphrey, do you hear my words ?

The two mounted serving-men emulously responded. Rapid and implicit obedience to orders was certainly among the virtues very practically inculcated in the household of Sir Thomas Holte. And Mistress Firebrace, colouring violently, but with a sun-burst of pleasure in her bright eyes, accepted the offered conduct.

This suddenly-assorted company proceeded then to take their departure from the scene of uproar ; and, exclusive attention being now devoted, as usual, by the people to the most violent and exciting portion of the spectacle, no kind of obstruction was offered to their retreat from the market-place.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIREBRACE SMITHS.

THOUGH not a frequent visitor in the town, Edward Holte knew very well in what direction to proceed to the abode of a man who was held, at the time, the best maker of weapons and defensive armour in Birmingham ; a man, indeed, who was much more generally known as *The Smith of Drifend* than by his Christian and proper name of Zachariah Firebrace. Our ancestors had a tendency to give a man his trade as a distinguishing appellation, so that it would have been no great wonder if, like so many others which we may suppose to have been lost in that all but universal patronymic, the Firebraces had merged into simple Smiths. But they were peculiarly proud of their name, and insisted on keeping it in all formal documents and signatures.

Firebrace itself might seem, however, not remotely to refer to the occupation of the race, which had now been hereditary in it for three centuries ; and on the same spot. Such is the tenacity of family life and residence in Birmingham, where there are numerous cases still to be found of a like lengthened association between a race and its dwelling-place. But a constant and religiously-preserved tradition assured the Firebraces of Birmingham that their name had been originally *Ferre-à-bras*, or Iron Arm, and was of French and chivalric origin—a fact they were believed to cherish with great pride, in spite of their devotion for so long a period to a mechanical trade. In reality, there was a singular story connected with the origin of the Firebraces in Birmingham, not without support in visible actualities.

It was said that the founder of the family was one of those Knight Templars who, in the fourteenth century, fled from France and the persecution set on foot against the order by Philip the Fair. The enormous riches and power of this body of religious warriors, exciting the greed and dread of kings themselves, were probably the true causes of the severities of expulsion and punishment to which they were subjected in almost all the countries of Europe, where they had establishments. But they were accused of divers enormous crimes, including blasphemy, sorcery, and *freemasonry* ; this last being represented by their enemies as a secret conspiracy for the spreading of the most

horrible, heretical, irreligious, and subversive doctrines in religion and the state.

Andomar Ferre-à-bras was, accordingly, among the fugitives from the tortures and stakes so liberally provided in his native country for the members of his order. But a similar persecution breaking out in England shortly after his arrival, he had found it necessary to hide his real quality and position in obscurity.

Birmingham, in all times well-renowned for kindness and hospitality to strangers, seemed to have offered this wanderer some peculiar attraction; possibly a similar love for, and skill in, the mechanical arts: for the knightly fugitive was said to have betaken himself to the exercise of the craft of a smith very shortly after his settlement in Birmingham, and to have raised himself and his family to wealth and consequence in the town, by the application of his ingenuity to various arts, the deeper secrets of which were supposed to be possessed by adepts in freemasonry. But, as might be expected, the Templar was particularly skilful in the manufacture of warlike implements. Hence, the first renown of the Old Crown House Forge. So it was styled, even in the seventeenth century, from the sign of the house, and to distinguish it from a number of more modern 'Crowns,' stirred up by the success in business of the original starters of the designation, as applied to a manufacture of the kind.

The *Old Crown House* is, in fact, the most ancient dwelling-house now remaining in Birmingham, dating probably from about the middle of the fourteenth century. Its size and solidity are still in themselves worthy of wonder and admiration, considered in relation to the resources and general style of domestic architecture in the age that raised it; even by ours, which has built the leviathan of the deep, and carried a railway over an arm of the sea in an iron tube; marvels, no doubt, of mechanical contrivance, daring, and ingenuity, but which will not last five centuries so little impaired!

Unshaken in all its massive main timbers, chambers, and roofs, to this advanced period of the nineteenth century, the Old Crown House still testifies to the science and opulence of its original architect and proprietor, the alleged Templar fugitive. But, even in the seventeenth century, it was the case that the Firebrace family was to be considered as having greatly shrunk from its original high estate, not in the fact that a portion of the extensive premises belonging to them in Deritend was devoted, as a smithery, to carry on the labours of vulcanic art—according to the family traditions alluded to, Ferre-à-bras had devoted his talents with great success in the department of mechanical art still pursued by his descendants—but a long course of intermarriage with the townfolk must strongly have anglicised, and, truth to say, *plebeianised*, the blood of the illustrious and high-born Templar, when, in the seventeenth century, his representative was found to be, both as a religionist and politician, all that was most opposed to orthodoxy and privilege in either.

To be sure, the traditions of the race pointed this way, from the ashes of the piles where the brethren of their ancestor had fallen victims to the cruelty and spoliation of kings and their abettors: but how completely Zachariah Firebrace had yielded to the republican and fanatic influences of the

age, he himself, it is very possible, was scarcely aware as yet. Only he had long been known in Birmingham for a man of the sternest puritan principles and manners, embittered, as it was believed, by certain family misfortunes and disappointments; among these being especially the early death of his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached; and the circumstance that, after an uninterrupted descent from father to son of three centuries, the race of the famous Firebrace Smiths threatened to become extinct in the person of Zachariah's only child and heiress, Dorothy Firebrace.

Meanwhile, these singular family legends were believed to be supported by certain remarkable circumstances, unless they were in reality the foundation for an imaginative version of the whole.

Hung up in the Church of St. Martin, over the family tomb of the Firebraces, was a full and very beautiful suit of armour, appropriate to a Knight of the Temple in the fourteenth century, and which had certainly remained there ever since a certain Andomar Ferre-à-bras, armour-smith of the town of Birmingham, flourished, died, and was buried in the town thereof. The house this skilful fugitive had built, saluted every eye that entered from the south, and attested to posterity his knowledge in the great art whose apron Solomon himself was said to have received at the hands of Adoniram, the master-builder of the Temple of Jerusalem. The sign by which the building was distinguished, according to a custom not yet confined to houses of public entertainment, was reported to be a masonic emblem, of unknown, mysterious, and very formidable import; to that degree, indeed, that it was confidently reported a carving of the same, on a great internal cross-beam of the house, was a kind of magic key-stone to support the structure, which had been raised by compact with the foul fiend, and would fall to pieces the moment the meaning was discovered!

In truth, the device in question was rather singular and suspicious; being the likeness of a crown, formed of two *fleur-de-lis* or *flower-de-luces*, turned back to back, on either side of a central club or mace. On the right of this emblem was a six-sided star, pierced with a small circular hole in the middle. On the left, a figure resembling a double triangle, or mason's levelling plane; no unlikely symbol of some republican hope and purpose of the Firebrace race!

Be the rest as it may, this device was the trade-mark of the productions of the 'Smiths of Deritend,' and was stamped on their weapons and filigreed into the breastplates of their suits of armour, and was accepted generally as a sure stamp of excellence; though, again, it may only have been the fanciful emblem adopted by a Frenchman, from the usual ornaments of a royal crown in his country, to denote the superiority of his manufacture.

CHAPTER V.

THE ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER.

To reach this famous armourer's, in Deritend, Edward Holte's direct way would have been to guide his fair companion from the tumult of

the market-place along the comparatively quiet Corn Cheaping; the agriculturists who frequented this continuing to take little other part in the disturbance than to stare at it in the distance, and exchange expressions of wonder and consternation. But he considered it better to avoid these crowded and gaping lines of rustic frequenters of the market-place; and, proceeding along a row of houses behind the churchyard, then called Mercers' Row, now Edgbaston Street, the retiring pair speedily passed along an unenclosed space around the ancient castellated mansion of the Lords of Birmingham. This residence was, at that time, and, indeed, until very late years, surrounded by a moat; and thither the affrighted Bailiff and his officials could be observed flying for shelter. Thence a narrow lane, by a windmill, led into the spacious street called Digbeth, and they had nothing to do but to wend their way peaceably down it to the quarter of the smiths, chiefly at that time in Deritend.

And now, if the age had been much given to such studies, young Edward Holte would not have failed to remark the influence of race in Mistress Dorothy Firebrace's character and demeanour. In spite of her puritan antecedents and surroundings, and her demure name, the gaiety and coquetry of her French blood appeared in her expressions and manners, much more than in the pretty-well certified account of her descent, or even in the sparkling of her vivacious eyes, and the changeful richness of the hues of her complexion.

It was speedily plain that she was not ill-pleased to find herself under the escort of so handsome and courteous a gallant as the heir of Aston was in person, and knew well how to exhibit himself in act and word; and whose appearance and demeanour probably contrasted advantageously in the imagination of a young woman so placed, and endowed with the kind of wit that is most sensible of the ridiculous and incongruous in the outward aspect of things.

'My faith! do but look how the worthy High Bailiff half waddles and half flies over hedge and ditch, like an affrighted gander back to the flock,' she exclaimed, laughing heartily at what was, in fact, rather a ludicrous spectacle, considering that the Bailiff was a very fat and puffy man, who would have made no bad representative of Sir John Falstaff, and was evidently running for sweet life. 'And this is he who swore so hugely the other day he would put in force the King's proclamation in our town, and compellate every man who holds suit and service of the manor to stand forth in the commission of array on his Majesty's behalf! Yet I am sorry for poor Johnny Cooper, too; 'tis a merry old lad, who laughs and grows fat, and means no harm to any one, if his wife—who is more royalist than the King himself—did not set him on all manner of rancorous dealings, on that behalf, with the townspeople. And when one thinks how unfairly his own masters and setters on, or rather Dame Cooper's, came by their authority, it makes the high-handed exercise of it harder to bear withal, you know, Master Holte.'

'It is very like, fair Mistress Firebrace,' replied the young cavalier: but, trust me, I am as much surprised as any one to find what a progress the new opinions have made in your town. It is true, I have not

long been at home from my university, to make much stay, for information; yet it seems to me a most wonderful change to have come over the entire face of things so suddenly. It is surely undreamed of at Aston. My father must be quite unaware of what men are thinking and feeling in Birmingham, to send me here on mine errand. There is only one change, Mistress Firebrace,' the young cavalier continued, fixing his eyes, which kindled lustroously with admiration as he spoke, on the beautiful creature beside him, 'that seems to me to be for the better, and that is all in your fair self! I remember you a bloomy, rosy girl, of twelve or fourteen springs merely, whose blossoming promised a lovely flower; but, by my faith, the promise is a thousand times more than fulfilled in the expanded beauty of the bud.'

Dorothy coloured, but evidently with no unpleasant excitement in the flush that visited her complexion.

'Ah, that is what my father and our preachers are always saying, and warning us against the sweet blandishments of speech you courtiers and King's men ever have at your command,' she said, laughingly averting her glance from Master Holte's warm and eager gaze. 'But,' she added, in a more serious, almost a sad, tone; 'but you are right to consider that your father, and those of his belief and consorting, are entirely ignorant—nigh neighbours as we are—of what is coming to pass among us. My father, I may say, has gone on in strides in his opinions of late, ever since a certain agent of the Parliament came to reside among us for a season, who is a man that speaks not well, or much to the purpose, one would say, yet hath a way of mastering and directing men's wills, in a rough, blunt fashion of his own, that is a marvel to me and all who witness his effects.'

'An agent of the Parliament in Birmingham? Who is he? For what purpose here?' said Edward, a good deal surprised and interested by what he heard.

'Nay, it is not for me to divulge what, perhaps, my father chooses rather to remain a secret, at all events at Aston Hall, though the man himself makes no great concealment of his business and purposes in the town. But here, as I have given you to understand, honourable sir, we of the HONEST and WELL-AFFECTED party have it chiefly our own way, and are not afraid one another should know in which quarter the wind puffs our chimney smoke!' Mistress Firebrace replied, with a somewhat satirical smile and emphasis on these words, which had become a party shibboleth in the application. But she went on to say, finding that Edward Holte looked annoyed at her so using them, 'Though I know not that there is any need to deny you the good man's name who is so busy amongst us, and the less that he is a member of Parliament, who has taken up open and resolute testimony against the King's manner of rule so far hitherto. And would to Heaven he had thought fitting to change it before matters came to the extremity they are driving at, and while it yet seemed possible among us of the people to put faith in his royal grants and protestations towards the people's liberty!'

'I would say amen to that prayer, Mistress Firebrace, only the word, I presume, is held for popish and obsolete among the new audacious sectaries of the age!' said Edward. 'But if this agent's name be no

great secret in Birmingham, and so well known in the world elsewhere, as are mostly those that figure the most ungraciously against the ancient laws and government of this realm, what is it ?

'The person is called one Master Oliver Cromwell, a brewer of Huntingdon, and, I think I have heard say, of some considerable interest among the people thereabouts,' replied Mistress Firebrace, in an indifferent tone, unconscious that in that name she had uttered the key-stone of the immense revolution at hand for England, and, through England, for the world.

'Ay, truly, one Master Oliver Cromwell?' replied Edward Holte, without appearing to attach much more importance to the name than the armourer's fair daughter herself. 'I have heard my Lord Falkland speak of him as of a harsh, confused, scatter-brained speaker in the House. Yet, as you say, Mistress Firebrace, of singular ability and power to persuade men to follow him in action. A man of action, I take it, therefore, rather than of words, which the times certainly require the most. What can Master Oliver Cromwell, then, be a-wanting in Birmingham? Oh, I have it now! I have heard that several of the Parliament men are busying themselves in these neighbouring counties to execute the ordinance to raise the militia on the behalf of that usurping assembly. This will be his business in the town.'

Mistress Firebrace merely replied, 'Tis like enough,' and was silent, as if fearing to betray some degree of implied confidence in her discretion.

'Well, but at least I may hope, I trust, there are exceptions, even in Birmingham town, to the general lack of loyalty and true allegiance that is to be feared, Mistress Firebrace,' said the cavalier, speaking with peculiar earnestness, as if he attached some great importance to the wish he expressed, and at the same time he looked downward at his lovely companion with something almost of entreaty and prayer in his look: that perhaps surprised, certainly a little fluttered her.

'It were hard else, honoured Master Holte,' she replied, with manifest confusion; 'very hard else, that the townspeople of Birmingham should all stand together, so closely knit together, against their King. So royal a King, too, as he is in most of his seemings! Not like his father, who was fitter, they say, for some poor Latin-accenced school-master, or a greedy vagabond pedlar, in his dealings. Why, if there be no man else loyal in the town, there is excellent Johnny Cooper, who is a ton of man in his flesh and merriment!' she concluded, with a light showery laugh, that very possibly concealed a feeling by no means so mirthful.

'But hath the King's Majesty no faithful subject among so many faithful ones that he hath in Birmingham?' pursued Master Holte, with increased earnestness of query.

Mistress Firebrace made an evident pause. Then, looking at the cavalier with a mixture of roguish gaiety and embarrassment, she answered, 'Truly, yes; the King has no more zealous and tinkle-tongued loyalist, in all the length and breadth of the land, than Mistress Cooper, the High Bailiff's wife, who is also the greatest termagant and man-masterer among us. But she, and, perchance, one or two others

that eat and drink daily at the Crown's expense, make about the sum total of the King's faction in Birmingham.'

Edward Holte looked very grave, in spite of the lively tone assumed in this reply. He seemed determined to ascertain clearly the point he was driving at.

'I concern myself little about such official and officious persons, Mistress Firebrace,' he remarked, 'but I should be very content to know whether the King's *fairest subject* in Birmingham cherishes not also some loyal feeling towards his sacred person and cause? There is no need to add, I ask you of yourself!'

'Great need, I do assure you, Master Holte; for I never should have known the bird by the description of the feathers,' the fair Puritan answered, with, however, something of the flash and pride of conscious beauty in her looks, as she disclaimed the compliment. 'But since I gather you speak of Dorothy Firebrace, though jestingly, I will answer you the very truth. I have not given my mind, which runs too much on idle thoughts and vanities, to great reflection in the matter. But, as is a child's and good townswoman's duty, I follow much as a gosling follows in the water-rings of the main flock. Only, if it be any satisfaction for you to know it, I do not of my own heart and impulse wish much success and exaltation to such sour and implacable minds as I have seen abounding among us of late, and trust my father will not be cajoled by them into taking some dangerous pre-eminence in the part adopted by the town, which I know hath been urged upon him of late. For he is a man of infinite resolve and stubbornness when the mood takes him; and, should the King's faction prove the stronger in the struggle, we have a good deal to lose besides our will and way in state and religious affairs.'

'Doubtless, Mistress Firebrace. Your father is the great armourer of Birmingham, and, as such, it is to him my father, Sir Thomas Holte, has sent me on an errand that I trust may prove profitable to him, and of service to us of Aston. For I should say our money will be considered as good as any other bidder's in an article of merchandise,' said Edward Holte.

'I cannot say, fair Master Holte,' replied the armourer's daughter, casting down her eyes with evident embarrassment. 'My father will answer you best for himself, no doubt; and here we are on the threshold of his house and smithery.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE OLD CROWN HOUSE.

THE armourer's daughter and her cavalier protector had now, for some time, been wending their way through Digbeth, which abounded in tanners and dyers, into the quarter of the smiths, as Deritend might very properly have been styled, since nearly all those of Birmingham at this epoch resided in it; a quarter by no means then meriting its unhandsome modern nickname of Dirty End, the true etymology of the

term being probably The-Rea-Gate-End, from a toll-gate established at the bridge over the river Rea, where certain entry-dues of the Lords of Birmingham were levied.

It was, in fact, one of the most substantial and wealthy districts of Birmingham at that time, the principal trade of the town being thus chiefly exercised in it—the Edgbaston of its day, in some respects, though not in the articles of external beauty and embellishment, in consequence of the nature of the business carried on in it. But here the masters of the Birmingham manufactures and principal men of the town resided, in the midst of their work and work-people. Our simple-mannered and congenial ancestors had not yet dreamed of the habits of seclusion and separation between the classes of society which modern luxury and super-refinement have introduced. On all sides Deritend accordingly resounded with the music of hammer and anvil, although the general style of the buildings was that of the most substantial resident citizenship. On all sides—from deep caverns of soot-hung timber-work—blazed the fires of unnumbered forges; on all sides could be heard the laborious pantings of hundreds of pairs of bellows, like that of the lungs of giants engaged in some mountain-heaving task-work.

And so the young pair, whom chance had thus mated, paused two hundred years ago—as any of the myriad toilers of Birmingham may at this day—under the eaves and before the wide porch of the mansion and workshop of the Firebrace Smiths, known as the Old Crown House. And the careful restorations recently effected as a labour of love by the judicious antiquarian proprietor, probably leave the structure much as it appeared to Edward Holte when he raised his eyes, upon the announcement with which Dorothy Firebrace broke what was becoming an embarrassing and entangling conversation, in spite of the secret feeling of satisfaction and pleasure in each other's good looks and congenial society that certainly ran through their whole brief association hitherto.

The extensive ground-floor, front and side, presented by the corner position of the Old Crown House to the street, pierced with handsome lattice windows; the broad projecting cornice of the upper story; the lofts above this, with their triangular gables; the tiled roof and high twisted chimneys; the ornamental striping in brown and white of the plastered walls that filled up the spaces of the massive timber-work—nothing is changed. To be sure, the showy gas lamp hung at the corner was then supplied by a dull-burning oil lantern; and the most esteemed prophet of that age of enthusiasm and of interpreters of futurity, dreamed not of that arch of a railway viaduct where the locomotive, 'winged with red lightning and impetuous heat,' crosses the line of vision, high in mid-air, in the gaze of living men, at the present background of the building.

Nothing, indeed, was to be seen behind the mansion but the out-buildings appropriated to the labours of the forge. After which a succession of gardens, orchard-ground, and fields extended to the banks of the river Rea on one hand, and on the other an open, heathy common led to the *village* of Bordesley.

A very different stream was the Rea of those days to the one now

offered to the saddened eye of the spectator—dark with the pollutions of a great city ; flowing sluggishly between haggard and half-tumbling piles of crowded tenements—answering perchance in yet gloomier respects to the poetical descriptions of ‘Acheron and Styx—rivers of death and hell!’ It was a clear, broad, shining stream, in which trout and salmon sparkled and leaped ; wandering through deep flowery banks and pastures and woodland into a far reach of fair and fruitful country.

Then, as now, the principal sitting chamber of this extensive old house projected very considerably over the porch into the street. But it had a latticed window in front as well as over the two sides of the projection, whence only light is admitted nowadays to a chamber narrowed in other respects the greater part of its original size, and thus consigned to gloom and twilight, instead of being, as of old, the most cheerful and illuminated apartment of the dwelling.

The entrance-passage of the building was also more than twice as broad as it now remains, in consequence of two small chambers being parcelled off on each side. Wide enough, in fact, it was to admit carts laden with heavy materials into an extensive courtyard at the back of the house. This enclosure was formed on one side by the elevation of the dwelling-house ; on the three remaining sides of a very irregular square by the covered forges and other necessary outbuildings attached to an extensive smithery.

Edward Holte, complying with his fair companion’s evident wish, halted with her at the porch, and for the first time looked round for his attendants. ‘They have walked the horses very leisurely,’ he remarked with a smile, ‘or else thought we did not desire to be too soon overtaken ; and, in sooth, for my part I wish the way had been twice or thrice as long.’

‘It could not have been the weight of the basket,’ replied Mistress Firebrace, blushing under the ardent gaze she felt fixed upon her ; ‘for I had but half concluded my marketing.’

In reality the young cavalier was greatly taken with his unexpected fair acquaintance, and felt unwilling to part. There was something that singularly interested him, in the contrast between the gay and vivacious beauty and lively discourse, and the puritan plainness of garb and demure position of Mistress Dorothy Firebrace, as the daughter of one of the most noted and severe sectaries of the town. The lovely colour that now suffused her complexion, the golden glow and consciousness of the fine eyes she now raised, full of archness and expression, to meet his, though but for a moment, completed his fascination. The questioning meaning and bright doubt implied in the glance shot into the young man’s very heart, and he was about to make some incoherent reply to the mute language of that look, when, luckily for the heir of Aston, the two grooms rode their horses up to the door ; one carrying Mistress Firebrace’s market baskets, pannier-wise, across his steed’s neck, the other leading his master’s vacated mount.

‘I must wish you a fair good-morning here, kind Master Holte,’ said Dorothy Firebrace, also assuming an air of distance and maidenly gravity on this approach. ‘Your way lies across the court-yard, to my father’s smithy—mine up the gallery stairs into the house.’

'Truly, gentle mistress ; but I can carry your marketing to the stairs within—my servants can remain here,' replied Edward, anxious to prolong the satisfaction he enjoyed, even by a few moments. And as the armourer's daughter made no objection, he took the baskets from his surprised serving-man, and again the pair wended their way through the open passage to the interior circuit of the enclosure beyond.

All of a sudden Edward heard his fair companion break into a light, silvery laugh, like the fall of the spray of a summer fountain in a bright sunshine. 'Forgive me, sir,' she said ; 'but I was thinking what your proud father would say, if he saw you thus helpful to a Birmingham artificer's marketing daughter ! Pray you have a care, as you set the baskets down—they are full of eggs.'

'All I regret is, not to be allowed to carry them further for you, sweet Mistress Firebrace !' said Edward, putting down his burdens, with a sigh that certainly seemed to regret something, at a place indicated by a gesture of the fair Dorothy. It was the foot of a flight of steep steps, which ascended to a gallery that ran all round the upper story of the house, with several similar descents, at intervals, and formed the only means of entering the chambers on the second story of the dwelling.

'No, no further,' replied 'sweet Mistress Firebrace,' also with a sigh that seemed like a softer and fainter echo of the one that had heaved the breast of Edward Holte. 'My father has the strictest notions on these points, and for a strange man—and tenfold more, a strange *gentleman*—of your name, to be seen in our house—would amaze him utterly ! I must bid you farewell now, Master Holte ; which, believe me, very truly and heartily I do.'

It was evident her mind dwelt on the literal meaning of the word—Farewell. And she uttered it with so musical and sweet lingering on the accent, that Edward Holte felt as if his heart melted away within him to some exquisite glow of feeling that sped like a warmer blood through all his veins. Yielding to the vivid impulse of the moment, though scarcely aware of what he did, he snatched the young beauty's hand, and pressed it with strange fervour to his lips that evidently excited even her alarm.

'For shame, Master Holte !' she exclaimed, hastily withdrawing it. 'What would my father say if he saw this ? What would the neighbours say, who all know that I am a betrothed maiden to one—of my own condition and degree ?'

'Betrothed ! said you *betrothed*, Mistress Firebrace ?' exclaimed Edward, and in a tone of surprise and dismay truly singular, considering the shortness of the acquaintance, and the little reason he apparently had to interest himself in the announcement.

'Betrothed, sir : I said *betrothed* !' replied the armourer's daughter, but, it must be allowed, with a very similar accent of sadness and discomfiture.

'To whom, then ? Who, in all this unbred, mechanic town, can have been deemed worthy of charms which would grace and add lustre to a royal court ?' Edward ejaculated.

'Oh, sir, you do far overstate the matter ; but 'tis the courtier style,'

replied Dorothy Firebrace, looking sufficiently pleased and proud at the eulogium, nevertheless. 'I am but betrothed to my father's foreman—the armourer you saw with me in the market-place—Tubal Bromycham by name. No such high and stately personage as you assert should pretend to me; but though now of poor estate, born of a most ancient and honoured lineage in this town: brave and good, and marvellously strong and skilful at his work, so that the proudest and wealthiest of the smiths' daughters in Deritend all envy me my good hap, and wish it was their own!'

'A coarse, horn-handed artisan to become the possessor of beauty like this!' exclaimed Edward Holte, in a very spiteful and angry accent.

'Not so. Tubal has a heart as gentle as the gentlest woman's, and open as day to all manner of kindness and generosity—where he is fairly treated in return,' replied Dorothy Firebrace, with a warmth that still further annoyed and disturbed her listener. 'I say not that he has the silken insinuation and winning graces of you high-bred courtiers, sir. But in his trade he is without a match for skill and power. And therefore do all men in Birmingham honour and esteem him to the full, and my father chiefest of all. Not to forget that he saved my father's life once, almost at the losing of his own—an act of bravery and nobleness never to be forgotten by any that hold that father dear!'

'I say not to the contrary, Mistress Firebrace,' Edward Holte now remarked, drawing himself up in an offended and pettish attitude, which there seemed no call for in what he heard. 'I say only that beauty like yours was never, to my thought, fashioned for the rude embraces of a mechanic artisan. But if you deem otherwise, 'tis not for me to cavil at your choice.'

'My choice! my choice, Master Holte! I said not it was my *choice*,' replied Mistress Firebrace, with evident hesitation, and yet with a strong touch of dissent and repugnance in her accent. 'But it is my father's will, as I have said, which it is not allowed to a dutiful child to dispute. It may be I have as good a relish as another for a prouder fortune and a brighter and gayer estate of life than is to be led in this dull and hard-working town. But what avails that? My fate is set before me like a ploughman's supper, which he must eat or none. And it should be remembered, also, Master Holte,' she continued, in a haughtier and petted tone, 'that although unjustly deprived of his ancestral rights and honours, this poor Birmingham mechanic of yours is by fair claim and descent of an antiquity of greatness to which the Holtes of Aston Hall are but as the morning mushroom to the oak of a thousand years! No record even professes to tell of the origin of the Birminghams, Lords of Birmingham; no man knows whether they are named after the town, or the town after them! Whereas, who knows not at what time and by what means your family became so glorious hereabouts?'

'You say truly, Mistress Firebrace!' replied Edward, now visibly displeased. 'The Birmingham anvil is tied round the neck of the Holtes, and will sink us through all time in the estimation of the smiths of Birmingham! But it is an old saying: Birmingham makes gentlemen for every county but Warwickshire. And besides,' he added, with an extremely scornful and bitter expression, 'it is very plain you love

this stumpy young giant, your betrothed ; and your happiness is therefore well assured in his society, whatever the rest of the world may think of a match as ill-assorted as ever was that of Venus and Vulcan, though your blacksmith be not lame !

‘Love him ! You say I *love* him, Master Holte ! Alack, the question was never asked me ! My father ordained that I should marry him, when I reached fully my eighteenth year, which lacks but a three-month yet. And I think *he* loves me. That is all,’ was Mistress Dorothy Firebrace’s somewhat broken and confused response to the cavalier’s indignant comments on her confessed matrimonial arrangements, ending, we are a little ashamed to declare, in a sudden and most uncalled-for gush of tears.

‘I thought it could not be, beautiful Mistress Dorothy, that such a mis-match was to your own taste and contentment !’ Edward Holte now rejoined, evidently softened and yet distressed by this display of emotion. ‘Fathers are surely madmen, to undertake thus to govern and dispose of their children’s chances of happiness and contented bearing of so heavy a yoke, if born unevenly ? But ’tis the same with mine ; who without so much as once consulting me, or leaving anything to my option in so nice a disposal, has engaged me almost from my cradle to the daughter of his neighbour at Hagley, the Lord Keeper Lyttelton.’

It was now Dorothy Firebrace’s turn to flash up with a singularly annoyed and passionate movement of the blood in all her youthful but electrically-charged veins. ‘But you !—you are a *man* !’ she exclaimed with vehemence. ‘And do you mean to say that you suffer yourself to be marketed in this way, like a sheep or a sack of corn by their owner ? But you are *like me*, perhaps,’ she continued, with satirical vivacity. ‘Your heart goes where a parent’s command directs it ; and possibly with so much the better reason that my Lord Keeper’s daughter being, as one may say, born to good fortune in every respect, clears her suitors of any mercenary suspicion, by her exceeding charms of person and mind !’

This was most maliciously spoken, of a truth ; for the Lord Keeper Lyttelton’s daughter, alluded to by Edward Holte, though likely to derive a large endowment of fortune’s goods, was notoriously deficient in the species of attraction which might have rendered them the less necessary in a woman of birth and high position. On the contrary, a rumour was general in the county that she was of a masculine and somewhat deformed figure, and of an irascible and sullen temper ; while it was quite certain that she was considerably older than her intended bridegroom. But the fathers of that age were like the fathers of most other ages of the world—with a good deal more power to enforce their wise opinions and behests than modern notions encourage them to exert.

Edward Holte’s face visibly clouded over. ‘But well,’ he resumed, with a brightening expression, after a slight pause, ‘perhaps I resemble you in another respect, Mistress Firebrace. I may not see so clearly the wisdom of my parents’ choice as to make it, altogether and without reservation, mine own. Nay, I think I could convince you of that if we had a little more time, and were not in a place so liable to observation.’

'Truly I had forgotten,' replied the armourer's daughter with a start, and glancing anxiously at the resounding sheds on the other side of the yard; 'and you remind me well, Master Holte—but for this time I have indeed no further leisure to waste. Our old housekeeper will be asleep over her wheel, expecting me home with my marketings, and our housemaids ready to gnaw their finger-ends for dinner. Let me go now, therefore, I pray you. Your way is straight on; mine is up these steps.'

'And am I never to see you again, fairest Mistress Firebrace?' exclaimed Edward, in a most lackadaisical and forlorn voice, and far from budging out of the way, placing himself more in it.

'That depends on your eyes, whether their sight be good or not—though by no means required to follow the whole flight of an arrow, shot upwards. It is my custom almost always at morningtide, Master Holte, to sit at the gallery chamber window above the porch we lately passed under, at work with my needle at the household stuff, and such like; for my father suffers no such vanities as embroideries or lace-making in his sober sight,' Dorothy Firebrace replied, resuming now all her former coquetry and liveliness of manner.

'Ay, indeed; a thousand thanks, sweet Mistress Firebrace! One of my stature might almost kiss a fair hand at the lattice,' the cavalier remarked joyously, and blushing with pleasure at the warm colouring that sprung also in the lovely Puritan's complexion. 'But I must give you something to keep you in mind of your promise,' he went on to say; and taking a small nosegay stuck in the mouth of a beautifully chased silver whistle hanging at a button-hole in his cloak, he handed it, with a graceful, beseeching bend, to the armourer's daughter.

She hesitated, however, for a moment to accept the gift; but for a different reason than the suddenly-smitten young lover feared.

'There are marigolds in them—French marigolds—the Queen's favourite flower,' she said, smilingly, but withdrawing her hand. 'My father would never away with these, if he saw them in my possession—or rather, he would at once.'

Edward remembered on the words the extreme unpopularity of the French Queen of Charles the First among the Puritans, and felt considerably annoyed at his own forgetfulness. But he speedily rallied. 'I wear marigolds for that very reason, Mistress Firebrace,' he said. 'My sister Arabella, who hath a strong touch of my father's defiance and pride, gathered it on purpose for me, that I might flaunt the Birmingham folks with the display of Queen Henrietta's emblems. And my base-born brother Dick—who on my soul, I think, wishes me no great good—did so taunt me on my remonstrances with her, that I was fain to prove to him I was not ashamed to show my true colours anywhere! Will you be of my mind again, and wear these marigolds for the giver's sake?'

He offered the nosegay once more, and looked so handsome and tender in the expression with which he bent toward the young damsel of the Old Crown House, that it was not in her woman's nature to refuse.

'I will keep it—but in secret. You shall see how well when I spy

you beneath my window, making the inquiry,' she said, taking the flowers, and, yielding to a kind of impulse she could not resist, placing them in her own bosom. Edward Holte, as a matter of course, snatched her hand to his lips. But in a moment she had withdrawn it, and, gliding past, ascended the steps of the open gallery with a rapid, fawn-like trip. He looked after her, almost doubtful whether he should not venture to obtain a renewal of her pretty pledge and assurances. But, pausing at the landing-place above, and probably guessing his intention, Mistress Firebrace waved her hand earnestly to warn him not. Then, with another relenting, and yet brilliantly gay and coquettish action, she kissed the marigolds on her bosom, and flew into an upper chamber of the house, carefully closing the door after her.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN CROMWELL.

EDWARD HOLTE proceeded on his way with much the feeling of a man who has passed some bright sunny opening in a wood, and entered again under the darksome woodland shade.

Only a shadowing of the mind, however, for a ruddy glow poured from every chink and recess of the enclosures he threaded. The whole range of works appeared to be in full operation. A jingling thunder of hammer and anvil, sounding like the clattering hoofs of a thousand steeds, echoed on all sides. Edward, in fact, had never heard the like before, though he had been repeatedly at Firebrace's smithy when a lad, in his father's company, who had long a good deal of business in it connected with the fittings of his new mansion at Aston.

A woman, who was out in the yard engaged in raising water at a draw-well close behind the dwelling-house, directed the stranger where 'the master' was to be found. Civilly enough, but with some marks of wonder and curiosity, which Edward was not aware there was anything in his appearance to warrant. But he remembered with a smile how, when a boy, he had often heard this well described as the cause of the superior excellence of the steel manufactured by the Old Crown Smiths. The water was said to be of a singularly icy coldness—colder even than that famous river of Spain to whose tempering the excellence of the Toledo blades was believed to be due. It was supplied from unknown springs, perfectly independent of the neighbouring river Rea, which might be almost dry in summer without affecting the flow of water in it by a bubble. Nay, some wild legend asserted that this silvered the iron plunged into it, in consequence of a great chest of that metal lying at the bottom, where it had been cast for security by the fugitive ancestor of the Firebraces! It is true there was another, to the effect that the well was bottomless.

What was certain is, that a very peculiar and nice construction was visible in the stonework of the well, all the pieces being fitted into each other in hewn segments of a circle. Indeed, it was looked upon by the knowing in those pre-Artesian days as a perfect miracle of art, and

went further than anything else to support belief in Andomar Ferre-à-Bras's freemason mastership.

But to continue. The image of the fair Dorothy faded not away from Edward Holte's consideration with her actual disappearance. It seemed to accompany him with every step of his onward progress, and the music of her brilliant and coquettish laugh continued audible amidst all the puff and pant and clamour of beaten metals around.

By no very unusual caprice of the human mind and heart, Edward Holte, wearied with the state and stiff decorum observed in high society at that time, and especially in his father's household, felt irresistibly delighted and attracted by the lively gaiety and freedom of his late fair companion's manner and talk. It was the more surprising and rousing, too, in so unexpected a quarter. Nevertheless, he tried to check the alluring recollection. He bethought himself, with a sigh, that this bright maiden could never be anything to him but a passing vision of loveliness and joy. It was impossible she could ever honestly be more to him, and Edward Holte was endued with a high and chivalric feeling towards women that forbade even the idea of tempting the good opinion he saw very clearly he had achieved with the armourer's daughter to lengths honour and virtue could not sanction. Not to forget that Dorothy Firebrace was herself of a respectable and wealthy family, though engaged in a mechanical trade, and that her puritan education, and the severity of the principles inculcated by those sectaries, made it improbable that the usual allurements to women from virtue could have much influence with her. The heir of Aston had merely acted on an impulse he scarcely understood, but could not control, when he asked her to see him again. He almost repented he had done so more than once as he crossed the yard, whither he was directed, to the principal forge. And yet he felt not unlike a man who projects some injury to another, when he found himself at last in the presence of Zachariah Firebrace.

The armourer was at work in the deepest recess of a vast shed, formed of massive timber-work, which crossed and recrossed in the roof and along the walls, like the web of some colossal spider of the pre-Adamite world. This shed was encumbered in all directions with massive productions of the forge of various kinds—furnaces, anvils, bellows, immense grindstones, vices, pincers, wooden horses—what not? All the means of modern vulcanic art, with the exception that these were forced to be within the compass of human strength and power to wield, the gigantic energies of steam not being yet subjected to man's intelligence and direction. The prodigious pincers, whose massive jaws only steam-power can lift and close—which snaps a bar of iron as unconcernedly as a crocodile might a cane stick—was of course unknown. Still more the tremendous and yet more docile force of the steam-hammer, which beats into shape indifferently the armour of a ship of war and the ornaments of a teapot.

There were numerous forges in the shed, and workmen busy at them—all with the unwearying assiduity said to owe so much to the eye of the master. And considering the business he came about, Master Holte's ought to have gladdened, one would have thought, at the ap-

pearance of the results of this labour. The massive wooden dressers all round the shed shone with the light reflected from many dozens of pieces of armour of polished steel—breast-plates, back-plates, cuisses, or armour for the front part of the thighs, steel-caps, helmets, swords, and the barrels of the short thick carbine in use by the ponderous cavalry of the age.

But Edward was struck immediately with the notion that he was disastrously forestalled in the market for this invaluable warlike gear. He had hardly caught sight of Zachariah Firebrace standing at a forge, but evidently only pausing from personal exercise of his profession, when his glance was attracted from the familiar to a less known form—that of a man who was at a little distance opposite to the armourer, with the anvil, at which the latter was at work, between them, and whose unusual and, to Edward Holte, portentous figure, was brought into strong relief, alike by the fiery glow of the open forge and a dazzling beam of sunshine that descended from the roof—fissured to allow of the passage of the smoke above—over a portion of his upper person.

A broad plain hat, with a steeple crown, such as was then adopted as a mark of distinction by the Puritans from the plumed head-gear of their showy cavalier antagonists, partly shaded the countenance of this stranger, even from the sun-glare thus cast on his head. But Edward, discerning at a glance the outlines of the rugged and massive visage below, close-shaven, and all aglow with a species of dark and sombre power, which shone out as from an inner fire on the tarnished but sanguine and brassy-flushed complexion, was struck at once with the conviction that he beheld the formidable agent of the Parliament whom Dorothy Firebrace had described to him.

Little doubt on the subject remained to him on a second and slightly more deliberate survey. The rest of the stranger's costume was evidently quite in the Puritan taste, in points of plainness of stuffs, absence of decoration, and general clumsiness of cut and fashion. It was, in fact, chiefly of leather, and that greased and worn, in the parts most used, in a sufficiently unseemly wise. But, in addition, it was very negligently put on; scarcely laced or tagged at the waist; the high, broad-topped boots were liberally travel-stained; the plain, flat linen collar quite dirty round the neck; the short brown cloak looked as if it had not been brushed for weeks. Nothing was in good order in the accoutrements of the man but his polished spurs and the pair of heavy pistols that garnished his belt. He wore no sword; at least, no scabbard was visible at the usual loop. But, at the moment Edward arrived, he was leaning on a naked weapon of the kind, the bright polish of which marked it as new, with the whole weight of his powerful, though not unusually tall, figure on it, insomuch that the blade, which was very thick and two-edged, curved slightly under the burden.

But although thus seemingly at pause, Edward, perceiving a whole sheaf of swords piled beside the stranger, and that one of his feet was set heavily on a much-hacked oak block before him, evidently used to essay the sound metal and edge of such weapons, felt satisfied that he had come upon the Parliamentary emissary engaged in the duty of proving the articles for which he had bargained. Yet, on the other hand,

he could not think, when he looked across to the armourer, that the earnest attention and excitement visible in his long, deeply-carved, and habitually staid and severe—even morosely melancholy and austere—visage could be moved by anything relating to the mere matter of business in hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIRMINGHAMS, LORDS OF BIRMINGHAM.

NEITHER was it so. And if Edward Holte could have known what occasioned this suspense of action and earnestness of thought and speech between the armourer and his customer, he would not have deemed his own errand in a very thriving way.

The former was the result of a conversation involving subjects of momentous interest to both, and which seemed to require more privacy than the smithy could afford. But the uproar on every side was as good a cover for secret talking as stone walls, and perhaps the zealous and daring partizan of the Parliament, who committed himself the most in the dialogue, was careless of who might overhear of those 'well-affected' artisan townsmen of Birmingham.

Captain Cromwell had paid his usual early forenoon visit to the Old Crown Forge to ascertain what progress had been made the previous day in the execution of the order he had entrusted to its diligence. And he took the opportunity, as was also usual with him, to urge upon the master-armourer (so Zachariah Firebrace was styled) the reasonableness and propriety of his openly joining the cause of the Parliament.

Oliver Cromwell—at the time altogether unknown as a soldier, and working, much on his own account, to raise a troop of cavalry under his command—was also not much considered as a member of Parliament, excepting in regard of his boldness and bull-dog obstinacy against the Court and all its favourers. But, among the zealots of his own persuasion, he was held to possess considerable powers of expounding and holding forth on Scriptural subjects, which he had influentially exerted in a more practical sense on his visit to Birmingham. In spite of the danger attached to such a proceeding, he had prevailed upon Zachariah Firebrace to agree to furnish him with arms for the troop of horse he had raised in his native county against the King; but, well-inclined as the master-armourer was to the cause, there he had stuck. Zachariah was wealthy, and a man of a gloomy, unhopeful temperament; had a daughter whom he fondly cherished, though with little external display of the feeling; and was well aware of the penalties of high treason.

'No, no, Master Cromwell,' he would say, 'I see not light enough yet in the wood. How are we poor citizens and townfolk to set ourselves in arms against the nobles and gentry who flock around the King, and who are trained to them and to the management of the fiery war-horse, that snuffs the battle from afar, and neigheth to the spearmen, aha! These weapons I furnish you withal are in the way of my craft; no man can challenge me thereupon, nor am I bound to know, by any evident

proof, to what service you intend them. And the King is drawing towards these parts, and we are an open, unwall'd town; and such as have the lawful direction of us—to wit, the Bailiff and his constables—are firmly set the courtiers' way. And though, as you say, I am chief of the Guild superstitiously styl'd of the Holy Cross, of this town, *that* gives me but mastery and control in the overseeing of the trades and charities. What can I do?

It was, nevertheless, a very great object apparently with Captain Cromwell—and with good reason, considering the warlike uses and central position of Birmingham—to win over some outward and visible tokens of adhesion on its part to the cause he served; and, even on this minor scale of action, he was destined to exhibit a good deal of that remarkable union of political foresight, fanaticism, cunning, and audacity which afterwards raised him to the supreme power in England.

On the occasion alluded to he had been peculiarly pressing upon Firebrace to declare himself. He announced that, in consequence of the King's movement from York to Nottingham, he had that day received advices that the Parliament Army, under the Earl of Essex, was to advance to Northampton—greatly superior, according to him, in numbers, discipline, and equipment to the Royalists. And while entreating the armourer to hasten in every way possible the garniture of his troop of cuirassiers, he took the opportunity to urge upon him the necessity of some decisive action on the part of the town of Birmingham.

'I would say to you, Brother Zachariah,' Captain Cromwell remarked, in the favourite Scriptural style of his party, and his own rambling one, 'even as John, by some called the Divine, writes in Revelations to the Angel of the Church of Laodicea: *I would that thou wert either hot or cold.* For the time is fully at hand when the servants of God must be sealed unto Him, if ever they are to be, that He may know His people in the day of His wrath! And how is that to be, unless you declare yourselves openly for one side or the other; and 'tis very plain which way your affections turn! And truly, Master Firebrace, I must needs tell you 'tis the common saying hereabouts that you hold the people in the hollow of your hand, and can tilt them either way—to a hearty zeal in the good cause, or to a lukewarm neutrality which will raise the gorge of both parties alike, to spue you forth as a derision and scorn unto the land! You tell me yourself that the Crown Bailiff of the town, who sets up for its chief ruler and ordainer, is but the representative of an usurped authority; concerning which I have heard from other quarters, too, a very sad and dolorous tale, which truly stirs mine own blood to such an exasperate resentment and intolerance, that were the wrong done to one of my own kith and kin, I could not more angrily conceive of it.'

Captain Cromwell was likely to be well informed on the point alluded to. From the first, Tubal Bromycham's extraordinary skill and strength in his work as a smith had attracted his attention, and the young man's master, who was much attached to him, had taken care to deliver full particulars of his history to the influential member of a body which, in the eyes of the people of England, was specially organised for

the redress of grievances inflicted by the tyranny and exactions of the Crown and aristocracy.

Briefly related, the story was that the last Birmingham, Lord of Birmingham, who enjoyed the title and its large appertaining estates and privileges, riding out one day from his manor-house, alone and unattended, was overtaken by three or four horsemen in a lonely part of the road to Aston—not yet converted into a magnificent park, surrounding a palatial mansion. The tradition stated that the reason why so distinguished a person ventured on the highways in a manner at that time so unusual with people of rank, was a love affair, which he was obliged to carry on privately, with the young heiress of the Grimsorwes, who were at that time owners of the property, in consequence of the young lady being a minor, in the custody of an uncle, who was anxious she should not marry at all.

These horsemen—whose company the Lord of Birmingham speedily discovered he could not rid himself of, in spite of many efforts he made for the purpose—were strangers in Birmingham. They had resided at an inn there for a few days, under pretence of purchasing certain of the goods manufactured in the town for London. But they were in reality robbers and villains by profession, the sweepings of that city, who had been hired to play a part in a most detestable conspiracy, by no less a personage than John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, Protector of England in the minority of Edward VI.

This grasping and tyrannous minister, whose ambition brought himself and almost his entire family, at a subsequent period, to the block, anxious in all ways to increase his wealth, had turned desiring eyes on the lands and hereditaments of the house of Birmingham; part of which it had the misfortune to possess in the neighbourhood of Dudley Castle, and had refused to yield up to the convenience of the haughty lord thereof.

Another villain, of some outward station and respectability, was yet to be found to complete the plot. One was discovered in the person of a member of the family of Holte, then of Daddeston—a younger brother of it, qualified for any kind of baseness by long service with the unprincipled Northumberland. But, moreover, this unworthy gentleman was known to cherish a personal spite and animosity against the Lord of Birmingham, having been rejected for him in a suit of his own to the heiress of Aston.

It was arranged that the malignant rival should meet with the favoured lover—accompanied so much against his will, but striving to quit himself civilly of the unwelcome society, that he might keep his secret love-tryst unmolested—as if by accident; but upon that, the robbers in the Lord of Birmingham's reluctant association were to set upon Holte, colourably maltreat him, and strip him of some money and valuables, probably supplied by the Duke, their suborner, for the occasion. Holte was then to affect to make his escape with difficulty, after recognising the Lord of Birmingham among his assailants, and to proceed at once to accuse him of being the chief in the robbery and felonious assault upon his person.

It is still a wonder that, even in so lawless and tyrannous a time,

when the high-handed exercise of power spared scarcely any rank or innocence, so transparent and monstrous a conspiracy could have achieved the end desired. But so it fell out; partly, doubtless, through a weakness of character on the part of the last Lord of Birmingham, calculated upon all along by his enemies.

He was apprehended, and assured that he would be brought to trial on the charge of felony, and condemned on the clear evidence that could be brought against him by Hialmar Holte and his ruffianly accomplices, who were alleged to be those of the unfortunate prisoner. He knew how universally the law was wrested at the pleasure of authority, and that the whole power of the Crown was in the hands of his deadliest foe, whose influence also was supreme in the county where his trial must take place, as the Lords of Birmingham were only peers by tenure, and not by summons to Parliament. And so, driven to despair by a long imprisonment—subdued by the violence and tortures of mind and body to which he was subjected—perhaps hoping for better times to come, when his enemy's unjust power might be stripped from him—the unhappy prisoner agreed to purchase his pardon for an offence he had not committed, and his liberty, by the surrender of all his property to the Crown as a criminal attainted and confessed guilty of felony, and thereby placed at its mercy.

The Duke of Northumberland, of course, speedily transferred this forfeiture to his own profit and advantage; but, although the oppressor did not long enjoy those ill-gotten goods, other Court favourites succeeded in their turn to the Dudley forfeitures, and no appeals to the justice or mercy of the Crown ever availed to obtain the restoration of the smallest portion of their ravished inheritance to the family of Birmingham.

The unfortunate head of it, whose want of fortitude was in some degree the cause of the ruin of his race, died of a broken heart, after years of vain appeal and litigation. And we know not whether it could be considered a consolation of his woes, that the maiden of his love, adhering, with the lovely magnanimity of her sex, to his fallen fortunes, persisted in uniting her fate to his, and shared, in consequence, in his ruin; for the merciless tyrants in power pronounced her inheritance also forfeit, as that of the wife of a felon, she having wedded her lover, with generous precipitancy, before his pardon passed the Great Seal.

Another of the creatures of Northumberland, who was strongly suspected of a share in the conspiracy—the unfortunate heiress's unnatural uncle and guardian—obtained a portion of this spoil as his reward; and it was from the last male representative of this base betrayer of his 'brother's blood'—who proved, by his extravagance and dissolute conduct, the destruction of his own family, and the truth of the proverb, 'Ill got, ill gone'—that Sir Thomas Holte purchased the Aston estate.

And now the unhappy pretended felon Lord of Birmingham—according to master-armourer Firebrace's account, to the patient and attentive agent of the Parliament for the Redress of Grievances—was great-grandfather, in a direct line, to that Tubal Bromycham whom he had chosen as a future son-in-law, and proudly avowed in the capacity.

A disinterested selection, certainly, it would have appeared on the

first blush, from the circumstance that, however ancient and honourable the family, it had long been so reduced that (still according to Firebrace's account) its lineal representative was at one time a worker in an iron mine.

The armourer took pains to give the exact particulars of how this had come to pass, and the manner of his own discovery of the fact, to Captain Cromwell, in the course of their many conversations on the disorders and tyrannies of the times; and the rather, perhaps, that the statement soothed his own pride, and accounted for so singular a selection of a son-in-law by a wealthy citizen, in a way honourable enough to that same wealthy citizen's feelings and superiority to vulgar prejudice, and, at the same time, legitimate notions of good thrift and furtherance to his business affairs.

The armourer traced his intended son-in-law's genealogy very closely from the last wronged Lord of Birmingham, stating that in the next generation after him, the family, unable to endure its degradation on the scene of its prosperity, had migrated to Walsall, in Staffordshire. Sinking here deeper and deeper into the slough of despond and poverty, it came to pass that the latter descendants of the race were compelled to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. Then, as now, iron and coal mining was the staple industry of the district, and Tubal Bromycham—himself the son of an unlettered labourer of this class, and left an orphan at a very early age—was abandoned, altogether untaught and untrained, to the same occupation, until chance brought him acquainted with the Birmingham armourer. Not a very lucky chance at first, seemingly, for the latter.

Master Firebrace, it appeared, was one of a number of the smiths of Birmingham—indeed, the chief of them—who at a certain period, about seven or eight years previous to the commencement of this narrative, conceived that they were charged too much for the ore and coals used in their forges and furnaces, chiefly brought from Walsall. They found some iron-masters who agreed to supply them at lower than the accustomed rates, and, by way of compelling other proprietors to come down to their prices, agreed to deal exclusively with these until the latter submitted also to their terms. But the proprietors in question took care to stipulate that the Birmingham smiths should come to the pit's mouth to receive their purchases themselves, being doubtless very well aware of the excited and dangerous state of the population in consequence of the general closing of the undersold mines.

Master-armourer Firebrace was appointed to the responsible office of negotiating and bringing home the first deliveries under the new tariff—not only by the unanimous deference of his fellow-craftsmen, but by his own sense of his proper position as original promoter and organiser of the movement. He was himself a man of great pride and overbearing contempt for such half-savage and poverty-stricken people as the miners of Staffordshire were considered at the time. Very possibly, too, he was not well aware of the state of exasperation and defiance into which the Walsall district had passed, naturally enough, on finding itself, and its wives and children, cast foodless and without employment out of the murky depths where, at best, men earned so hard a loaf.

Accordingly, armourer Firebrace, arriving with a long train of carts and wagoners, and the very inadequate civil support of the two regular constables of Walsall, at Longswirl Mines, only awakened to a sense of his danger, and inability to resist it, in the midst of a swarming, furious mob, who, with their begrimed visages, half-naked, haggard forms, madly flourishing pick-axes and spades, resembled, in the armourer's long subsequent dreams, nothing other than the fiends of a pandemonium broken loose.

Constables and wagoners took to flight at once, and for the most part escaped in comparative safety, though with a mauling which aching bones kept in remembrance with some of them to their dying day. But though Firebrace himself, perceiving how completely overpowered he was, attempted no resistance, he was not permitted to follow the example of his company. The enraged miners seized upon him, and, aware that he was the prime mover and agitator of the Birmingham smiths against them, determined to make him a memorable example of retribution. It was proposed, and unanimously agreed, to drag him to the mouth of an old disused pit, of unknown but believed unfathomable depth, destroyed ages previously by fire-damp, and cast him to the bottom.

This resolution was in course of execution. In spite of a now maddened effort to extricate himself on the part of the armourer, he was hurled headlong on his way to the intended destruction by the furious multitude. But, luckily, the mine in question was at some little distance beyond Walsall, and on the way another party of miners, belonging to the underselling owners, happened to be returning from their work. Principal among these was a young man of about nineteen, but of extraordinary personal strength and resolution of character—very unlike his near ancestor, he of the forfeiture, for the young man was Tubal Bromycham.

As he had been reared in as wild and primitive notions of justice and natural right as any other of the Black Country miners, it is very possible that it was rather a feeling of partisanship with his proper owner than a sense of the illegality and cruelty of the assault that determined Tubal to interfere in the rescue of his master's customer. But so he did; and as his fellows of the Longswirl mines were very well wont to follow his lead in most of their active diversions, and were irritated at the contumely they had been subject to on their owner's account, they readily joined him in a gallant onset to redeem the prisoner from his assailants.

It needed, however, all the prodigious strength possessed by Tubal, and its unsparing exercise in the way of knock-down blows and fisticuffs, to accomplish the result. Firebrace remembered very well that, for nearly twenty minutes, he became, as it were, the bone of contention, the football banded to and fro, the flying shuttlecock, of a battle, that seemed rather of maddened bulls and buffaloes than of men. Once he was even about to perish rather disgracefully—too bruised, beaten, and stunned to attempt anything at his own preservation—under the fire-shovel of a stalwart Amazon, of more than six feet high, with a baby at her breast, who hit mercilessly at his skull, with the apparent purpose of securing the honours of his braining to herself. Indeed, how he was saved Firebrace himself entertained no species of distinct recollection.

But on returning from a state of insensibility, to which one of these vigorous strokes had consigned him, he found himself lying at some distance from the scene of action, partly concealed behind a little mountain of cinder and ashes, with Tubal Bromycham bending over him, bathing his bleeding skull with sulphurous water from one of the neighbouring pools, and endeavouring thus to restore him to life.

The humane young giant afterwards explained that he had carried the object of his solicitude off the field of battle on his back, *butting himself a way with his head*—a not uncommon Walsall fighting feat—through the thick of the opposing combatants. The fury and generalness of the *mêlée* afterwards gave some scope for the exercise of another of his physical accomplishments, in which he was quite a match for the swift-footed Achilles himself. But at the juncture in question Tubal lost no time to account for his rescue to the defeated rebater of the Walsall staples. He entreated him to resume his flight before a discovery could be made, as it was pretty well certain the much inferior Longswirl forces would be driven from the field by the insurgent crowd on the other side.

To the best of his ability, Firebrace attempted to comply with this advice. But he was so disabled and demoralised by fear and the violence to which he had been subjected, that he was unable to move more than a few paces. And thus, as he ever afterwards gratefully confessed, must again have fallen into the power of his exasperated foes, but that Tubal, observing his condition, hoisted him once more on his shoulders, and fairly carried him on them over many miles of rough and all but impassable country, out of further danger of pursuit.

Tubal himself, however, seemed not to think he had done any great matter in this. He was for returning at once, after setting down his burden near Birmingham, if need were, to take further part in the fray. But the grateful armourer would not suffer it. He perceived very plainly that the generous act the young man had performed would expose him to special animosity on the part of the main body of miners. He ascertained from himself that he had no relatives to be anxious for his safety; and he insisted, upon these considerations, on Tubal's accompanying him quite into the town, to receive some substantial mark of his gratitude. Yet such was the heroic simplicity and disinterestedness of Tubal Bromycham's nature, that he seemed literally unable to understand that he had acquired any title to the armourer's benevolence. It is even probable he would have persisted in the purpose he announced, if Firebrace had not continued to declare his inability to proceed without assistance.

A few days' residence in Birmingham seemed, however, to effect a revolution in the youthful giant's notions of things. Strange as it may appear, he had never been in a town before; and the sight of the wonders of manufacture into which the rude material he had spent his life in casting on the surface of the earth was wrought, awakened in him what might else have remained a hidden, but extraordinary and truly artistic, genius in that class of workmanship. Tubal was seized with a passion to become a smith, and readily yielded to the armourer's friendly request to him to acquire skill in the art as his apprentice.

Perhaps if Edward Holte had heard the story, he would have fancied the beauty of the armourer's daughter had something to do with that acceptance, but Dorothy Firebrace was then a child of ten years old.

In relating the story, Master Firebrace always, however, asserted that it was quite by chance, and at a long subsequent period, that he discovered his marvellous apprentice's high descent and rightful pretensions. Tubal had suffered his very name to sink from its proper syllables into the common country pronunciation of Bromycham. Ir truth he seemed rather ashamed than proud of his pedigree from the weak-hearted, alleged robber, Lord of Birmingham. Firebrace only discovered the facts of the case by accident, when Sir Thomas Holte, having heard of the fame of Tubal as an artificer in all kinds of iron-work, wished him to attend at Aston Hall, to assist in the casting of the ornaments and fittings-up of his then externally-finished structure. Tubal confessed to his master the old feud, of which mention has been made, to excuse his compliance, but, with an artist's natural vanity allowed himself to be smoothed into submission by the admiration and praises his extant labours extorted from the good taste of Sir Thomas Holte and his family.

Tubal's good nature in this respect, the master smith of Deritend thankfully admitted, was a pretty penny's-worth in the way of the firm. Sir Thomas Holte delighting amazingly in the decoration of his mansion with ornamental iron work : and in that piping time of peace, there was no great employment in the proper business of an armourer-smith in Birmingham.

In particular, Sir Thomas had a fancy for chimney-piece and fire-place decoration, of a most costly and elaborate device. He even procured the assistance of a Dutch artist as a designer of these embellishments which Tubal was at first employed to cast in furnaces set up for the purpose at Aston. But he speedily exhibited a natural genius in the task work superior to the taught foreign artist's ; and the greater part of the magnificent fire-place, garden gates, fantastic window framework, roofs of the minaret towers, and other curious ornaments in bronze and iron, at Aston Hall, were alike of Tubal Bromycham's design and execution.

One day, nevertheless, a difference arose between the haughty Aston baronet and the no less proud and independent artist-artisan.

Firebrace always declared himself unacquainted with the occasion of this breach of the good understanding so far existing, and which Tubal obstinately refused to communicate. The young man was even violently exasperated, for a long time afterwards, whenever any questioning of the subject was raised ; and, indeed, sometimes declared his intention if further teased on the matter, to depart, and pursue his occupation in some distant place.

No doubt it was partly in dread of this possible abandonment, as well as the gratitude and admiration Firebrace felt towards his helpful pupil and foreman, that induced him at last to resolve to bestow upon him his daughter in marriage, and take him into direct partnership with himself. Yet, strange to say, for a considerable period, the reluctance and disinclination to this most advantageous arrangement for him, was on the side of Tubal Bromycham ; but the charms of the daughter, just rising

into the perfection of early womanhood and beauty, powerfully added to the generous entreaties of the father, it is to be presumed. At all events, at the time when Captain Cromwell arrived in Birmingham, a formal betrothing had taken place between the young pair, seemingly to their mutual contentment and satisfaction.

CHAPTER IX.

FORESHADOWS.

THE parliamentary commissioner had not failed to draw some inferences from the stories he heard on the subject of Tubal Bromycham, and to adapt them with singular dexterity, under his rough outward forms of speech, to the grand object he had himself in view. He represented both to the armourer and his intended son-in-law that the unjust forfeiture which had stripped the latter of his true place in society, was the very kind of wrong to the subject which the glorious Parliament then in being would be the most certain, as soon as it secured the power, to set to rights. They had even, therefore, greatly more than the motives common to all true Englishmen, who were resolved not to become in themselves and their posterity a nation of crouching Asiatic slaves, and to maintain the purity of true religion against popish and prelatical invasions, to stand forth in the good cause.

The commissioner found a very willing hearer in the younger man, in whom he discovered a vein of bitterness and animosity against the powers that were, and the state of things in general, hardly to be accounted for, even from his ancestral wrongs, and his own personal privation of his rights.

At times, it crossed the subtle and penetrating mind of Cromwell that the quarrel between the iron artist and his patron at Aston Hall, must have been attended with peculiar and unknown circumstances of aggravation. Tubal never mentioned Sir Thomas Holte without some expression of scorn and indignation at the pride and tyranny of his character. Firebrace stated that he had frequently headed formidable poaching forays into the baronet's preserves, and those of the royal chase in his charge at Sutton Coldfield, purely, he believed, in annoyance and defiance, since he killed much but never brought away a single head of game of any sort. But still, the older and more prudent craftsman could not be won into any more open marks of adhesion to the Parliament than engaging to furnish their officer with the arms he needed. And Cromwell, as has been seen, was making a particularly earnest renewed appeal to the armourer at the very time of Edward Holte's arrival on the scene of action.

'See you not that it lies chiefly with yourselves, Master Firebrace, to deserve the earliest handful of justice from the Parliament?' he was saying just previously. 'Why should you hesitate? I tell you, of a truth, I myself am placing in these weapons and armour of proof all that remains to me of two fair patrimonies, expended in promoting this good and great cause, and supporting the persecuted brethren for

religion's sake. The tyrant would not let me betake myself thereupon even to our poor and desolate plantations in the New World, surrounded by cannibal Indians, in a godly company of us that were at the time so minded; but I grudge not the sole inheritance of my children to this holy service; and I pray you take counsel by my example, and hazard some little matter in the behalf of Christ, crucified again in these days by these enormous persecutors!

'Were the need so pressing? Yet I cannot think the King would be so obstinate as not to take wiser counsels in time, and shun his own or his people's destruction!' said the armourer, faithfully representing the well-to-do middle classes of his own and of every age, in reluctance to extremes.

'You know not, then, his obstinacy and full-blown madness of pride and prerogative, if you deem so,' the captain replied, vehemently; but adding, with a sort of half melancholy, half satirical smile of recollection, 'I had cause to know it all of him right well, when he and I were boys together! You look surprised, Master Firebrace; but I must tell you I had a jolly old uncle once, who kept such state and wassail at a place called Hinchinbrook, in Huntingdonshire, that to this day there is fame of it in that county, and little else left to the name. And what must this worshipful knight, for such he was, but take upon him to entertain the man's father who is now upon the throne—King James that was—upon one of his progresses. And, behold, there being none other of higher degree convenient, I must be sent for to be whip-boy and plaything to my young Prince Charles, of whom there was no thought at that time that he should inherit the crown, but was on the journey with his father and brother, the Prince of Wales, for a treat, to Scotland; though, God wot, by all we hear of that country, 'tis not the pleasantest direction for a native thereof to turn. But I interrupt your anvilling, master armourer.'

'So be so; my arms are not so limber as they once were; rest is good for them,' replied Firebrace, who listened to this courtly anecdote with the unusual mark of attention, on his part, indicated in a cessation from his toil at the forge.

'I would not stop the work, howbeit; especially as I see our famous foreman is absent, who doth the business of three when he is so minded,' Cromwell replied; yet he proceeded, as if the story amused himself also. 'Well, as I have said, they sent for me to my uncle, jolly Sir Oliver's, at Hinchinbrook, to be a playmate to the young prince, who now is King. And I, being a rude, hardy, country lad, of my ten years of age, disdained greatly at being forced to put myself in some fine stiff suit of brocade buckram, with the cruel *chevaux de frise* frills they wore at times bristling like a wild boar's chine round my neck, and so was in a very uncourtly ill-humour when they brought me to the prince's presence, and left me with his Highness to entertain him to my best. And he, being the very perfection of high-bred gentility, and disdainful pride of his royal estate, though but a slender, pale, red-haired boy—he takes upon him at once to make sport of my awkward and ungainly appearance in my fine clothes—calls me ill-dressed ploughboy—hog in armour, as I think—or what should mean the same. So thereupon I

answered his Highness—rudely enough, no doubt—that I was not then offending his sight by any pleasure of my own, and if I was a ploughboy, would indeed greatly prefer to be out in the good green fields, under the free sky, than in his Highness's railing presence. Upon which, his Scotch blood waxing suddenly choleric, the princeling rebuked me as wanting reverence to his high little person, forsooth; and, upon further rejoinder, thrashed me rather smartly over the cheek with a riding switch he carried. There was still less reverence then, you may bethink you, shown on my part to the blood of my masters, for in an instant his Highness lay flat on the floor, with his delicately-carved royal nose spurring the blood of kings about him! Yet, though he had felt so manifestly the force of my arm, and must have guessed thereby that he was no manner of match for me—a big, robust, surly boy, such as I was, some two years his elder—when he rose up, nothing would content Prince Charles Stuart but he must fight me. And so, believe me, Master Firebrace, he will fight his people now.'

'You are a fit champion for him then, of a surety, Master Cromwell,' said the armourer, looking with astonishment at the man of such a boy.

'I do so purpose to show myself, master armourer,' replied the captain, with a sedate and thoughtful expression. 'But I had ill dreams on it, too—a very comfortless nightmare to my couch that night—whither I was sent most famously rated and supperless.'

'Tell me this also: there is sometimes a foreseeing in dreams more than carnal men think for,' said Firebrace, who, in spite of his advanced opinions in Church and State, partook as largely as any one in the superstitions of his time.

'Nay, but this was downright midsummer madness, though it was not midsummer at the time,' replied Cromwell, smiling; and yet he, too, seemed strangely impressed with his own words as he continued. 'Well then, sir, I had fallen asleep sobbing over my uncle's most angry rebukes, and perchance some smarting of his displeasure elsewhere than in my mind—I think I must, I say, have fallen into a slumber of some sort, when suddenly my room and counterpanes became all of a flutter like a flock of pigeons mounting. And, instead of my uncle's house-keeper, charitably bringing me some caudle for my hungry stomach, which I confess I expected, and my nightcap, which I remember I lacked by her negligence, a giantess strode into the room, and up to my bed, and bade me be of good cheer, for all that had passed that day; for that I should live yet to be *the greatest man in England!* A likely story is not that, neighbour Firebrace, while there's a King in England? But, to make an end to my story, and to complete the joke, this giantess seemed to me to flourish a royal crown in her hand—instead of a nightcap—such as was on all the King's liveries I had seen that day, with which I know not what long space she tantalised me, trying to clutch it, to put upon my bare pate and keep it warm, until I woke with a yell of anger and rage—yet could never persuade myself, then nor since, that I had been asleep at all! But, hist! what manner of a fine court gallant is this stepped out of one of Sir Peter Paul's showiest canvases in the presence-chamber at Whitehall, when we carried up the Grand Remonstrance to his Majesty?'

It was in reality at this unpropitious moment that Edward¹ Holte made his appearance on the scene.

CHAPTER X.

A MOVE IN THE GAME.

'It is even our ill neighbour at Aston, Sir Thomas Holte's only lawful son and heir. He hath but a devil's cub of a bastard, who is a lawyer in London, for another,' replied the armourer, in a vexed and surprised undertone to Captain Cromwell.

'Ay, ay, say you so?' remarked the latter, evidently with excited interest. 'In truth, he looks like a very King's man, with all those fine flowing womanish curls on the shoulders, nicely disparted on the smooth forehead, which I do never espy on a man than I hunger to twist my fingers among them to much such a like purpose as the oak branches tangled Absalom's on his restive mule. But so, master armourer, are your men about us to be depended upon in case we should need help against this fine sworder?'

'Help, Master Cromwell! help against one man!' exclaimed Firebrace.

'What know we how he may be tailed outside? May they not have heard at Aston of my presence and business in the town?' returned the captain, with a glare full of scrutiny and suspicion at the approaching cavalier. 'And did you not tell me that the pride-mad baronet there was raising horse on the King's side?'

'But they are not armed that I wot of, Master Cromwell, and most likely it is on a matter relative to that, the young gentleman comes here,' said Firebrace.

'Ho, ho! unfanged adders we will not fear!' was the reply.

By this time Edward was almost close at hand, and Cromwell was aware that his own dark searching glance was amply returned by the young cavalier, though with less of menace and scowl in the expression. Both felt, however, that they were hostile planets, traversing each other's orbits. On the other hand, the heir of Aston saluted the Deritend smith with more than customary politeness and deference, even raising his hat for a moment—a very great condescension at that time on the part of a person of Edward Holte's rank to a person of Master Firebrace's.

Firebrace himself certainly felt gratified by this mark of respect, but did not like to exhibit the feeling under the stern gaze of his parliamentary customer. He drew up his tall and grisly person to its height, and folding his bare arms, with the hammer he had been using still in hand looked at the stranger without any response of civility, merely remarking, 'Master Holte, of Aston—what may be your pleasure, sir?'

'Why, Master Firebrace, you used not to look so like a stranger on my namesake once upon a time; and have the few years since my schoolboy days so altered me that you seem scarcely to know me again, now that I am come to live among my father's friends and

neighbours?' said Edward Holte, auguring no good from this manner of reception.

'We of Birmingham are so, in a sense, Master Holte; but times are changed, sir, times are much changed!' replied the armourer, very sulkily, and now upon some reminiscence of his own.

'Truly; but not so ill for men of your craft, Master Firebrace,' said the young gentleman, desirous evidently to conciliate; 'and the proof is, that I have come to you to order furnishing for a troop of horse, mustering some seven score good stalwart yeomen, fellows of my father's tenantry, which he is raising in compliance with the King's commission of array, who has been pleased to name me their commander.'

Captain Cromwell gave an uneasy shuffle in his position, but made no observation, looking intently at the armourer for his reply.

Firebrace was evidently embarrassed, and there was a slight pause. But he met Cromwell's fixed regard, and seemed to feel the necessity of speech.

'Truly, then, Master Holte,' he said, still with some hesitation, 'I am sorry to have to disoblige you, but all my forge hands are engaged in other work, and I cannot do your bidding in anywise.'

'Why, how so, Master Firebrace?' said Edward, looking around him. 'Here seems armour-gear ready to hand for as many and more than I have reckoned to you. Ah, and of the new and excellent shaping, to my eye! What are these plates of steel else?'

He pointed to the symmetrical row of polished cuirasses, skilfully arched to the chest, which covered all one murky side of the apartment with a silvery glare.

'These are coverings for some poor honest fellows' breasts, who will freely adventure them in a good cause in other respects, sir, but are bespoke,' said Captain Cromwell now, and not by any means in so civil a tone as the words he used were in themselves.

'Tis true, sir; this armour is made to a London order,' said Firebrace, striving to speak as if he thought he was making an ordinary announcement of a business transaction.

'Not so, master armourer,' the captain resumed, in a stern and uncompromising tone; 'it is made to my order—to the order of Oliver Cromwell, burgess of Parliament for the good town of Cambridge. I am not afraid to own Christ before man!'

'And do you call it owning Christ, sir,' said Edward, turning angrily on the stranger who thus audaciously put himself in the front of the discussion, 'arming the King's subjects against his lawful authority?'

'Quite the contrary, sir; I and my fellows are in arms to *maintain* the King's lawful authority, as signified by his Majesty's faithful houses of Parliament, to this people and nation.'

This was the style adopted by the Parliament in declaring their resolution to resist Charles by open force, in order to do as little violence as possible to the deeply-rooted veneration and awe of the English people, in that age, towards the person and prerogatives of the royal power.

'It is none the less, but rather all the more, *high treason*, not only i you who publish and project the same as your purposes, but in all who aid and abet you therein,' returned Edward Holte, passionately. 'And

so his Majesty has had it proclaimed at the market-cross of Nottingham, where—by a reporter even you would not dispute, Master Cromwell—he has now openly set up his royal standard of deliverance from the misleading and tyrannies of you and your fellows in the London Parliament.’

‘Is it even so? The Lord be praised that has hardened Pharaoh’s heart to a greater redemption, against all the signs of the times and of His judgments!’ exclaimed Captain Cromwell; and probably with no feigned satisfaction in what he heard. ‘Said I not truly, Master Firebrace,’ he continued, addressing the armourer with a vehemence that quite undid the effect of Edward Holte’s denouncing on the other side, ‘that the time for the winnowing of the corn from the chaff has come, and for all men to ponder the text, “*Now the just shall live by faith; but if any man draws back, my soul shall take no pleasure in him*”’ (Heb. x. 38).

‘Who is for *drawing back*, good Master Cromwell?’ said the armourer pettishly, yet evidently thrown on his mettle. ‘Do not pick me up ere I fall.’

‘Oh, you, sir, and your party are well known for cappers of texts and gospel evidence; but this is a matter of statute law and customs of this realm,’ retorted Edward. ‘And I warn you, Master Firebrace, you are placing yourself in the deadliest shot and aim of the law thus to supply the King’s rebels and proclaimed enemies with weapons and munitions of war against him.’

‘It cannot be, sir; I do but the wonted business of my craft in the matter,’ returned Firebrace; yet an evident paleness came over his bronzed and heated complexion.

‘Then, at the least, you should make no distinction of parties, master armourer,’ replied Edward eagerly; ‘and this plea may perchance avail you at another day. Divide your present manufacture between us of Aston and this stranger. We will pay you as well, if not better, than any Parliament-mongers in the world. You cannot, sure, doubt my father’s ability in that way; and ’tis not the King, but Sir Thomas Holte, whom I offer you as paymaster.’

‘The more sufficient bondsman of the two, of a truth, unless the Oxford gownsmen have better luck in sending him their plate to melt than those of Cambridge, whom I stopped in the fact,’ Cromwell replied, with a smile of some gloomy humour. ‘However, young gentleman, I must let you know that what you wish cannot be, unless you would have your father’s yeomen ride to the King’s battles with O. C. on all their swords and armour buckles; for I purpose, I promise you, that Oliver Cromwell’s troopers shall be known for whose they are, wherever they go.’

‘On their gibbets, I trust, chiefly, sir, if they show themselves as causelessly rude and offensive to others as their captain hath to me, from no reason that I know of,’ returned Edward sharply, much provoked at this intimation. ‘Still, Master Firebrace, if you really purpose to observe a fair neutrality, you will give us the next spell of your handiwork, and equip me and my men in time to attend his Majesty on his certainly announced journey southward!’

Firebrace looked puzzled, This assurance of the King’s intention to

come to direct collision with his mulinous Parliament, on a route which would bring him very near Birmingham, if not into it, evidently startled him. 'Why, for that matter, Master Holte,' he began, in a wavering manner, 'in respect of the esteem I bear your honourable self, rather than your house or father, worshipful Sir Thomas——' But Cromwell interrupted him at this point.

'Neutrality!' he exclaimed in a voice of thunder. 'Neutrality! who speaks of *neutrality* between God and the devil? No, Master Firebrace, he who is not with us is against us, in this great contest between Satan and the Lord! And the real traitors and enemies to the country are those whom the Parliament has declared so, any and all, the aiders and abettors of yon rash, misguided tyrant, in setting up this war against the people of England! And now, as this fair-spoken young man hath yet plainly declared such is also his intention, I call upon you, Master Firebrace, and all other true and honest citizens of this town who hear me, to assist in the execution of the Parliament ordinance, made especially to fit such cases, whereby imprisonment during the pleasure of the two houses is the least penalty denounced on such malignant incendiaries and upraisers of rebellion. Do you hear me, master armourer, and will you and your men be helpful to me in the enforcement of this wise and just decree?'

Firebrace stared in great astonishment at the sudden outbreak, while Edward Holte burst into a derisive laugh. 'Make me your prisoner, will you!' he exclaimed. 'Why, the town has never a jail in it but such as is at the lord's manor-house, which is held by a good friend of our family; and I think I could spit all the force in constables likely to be brought against me on a skewer for roast larks. What do you mean, sir? Are you mad?'

'Good men and true!' said Cromwell, turning to the smiths around, who, startled by the noise of the altercation, were now mostly resting from their labours and listening to what passed, 'you hear how this pervert and malignant from Aston scoffs at you and your town! Will you stand by me while I make him captive for his traitorous designs and speeches, and send him to London as an assurance and earnest of your hearty zeal in the good cause for which all faithful Englishmen will soon be in arms? Moreover, he will be the best of hostages for the security of your town from the bloodthirsty assaults and insolencies you will else be sure to receive from the tyrannous King's bashaw at Aston.'

The brawny auditory gave a kind of murmur of assent, but looked evidently for more precise directions to their master.

Firebrace, on his part, was visibly both amazed and agitated at these sudden proceedings. Yet Captain Cromwell had established an influence over his mind which he did not find it easy to withstand, and he tried to betake himself to the usual resource in such cases—a kind of middle way.

'Nay, sir,' he said to Cromwell, 'you are surely too hasty. Yet I would not, Master Holte, that you wasted more time here on your entreaty, which I can by no means comply with, having other employment, as I have said, for all my forges, for months to come. I advise and pray you rather to lose no time in leaving the town, for the people are not well disposed to those of your name at present, and——'

'But I say he shall not leave the town, saving as a prisoner, to answer for his delinquencies, so openly avowed and enforced, before the committee of Parliament in London,' said Captain Cromwell, who seemed determined to urge matters to extremity, and, moreover, actually stepping between young Holte and his proper line of exit in case he had adopted the friendly suggestion of the armourer.

Edward was more provoked at this action, possibly, than the words accompanying it. 'By the King's life!' he exclaimed, stepping back, with his hand on the hilt of his sword, 'and who art thou to threaten me thus? Stand out of the way, ruffian, or——'

'Nay, if that be your game, we will try one of your weapons, Master Firebrace, on a cavalier costard' (head-piece) 'instead of an oak block was the ready retort; and as Captain Cromwell raised the weapon on which he had hitherto been leaning with a threatening flourish, Edward Holte was compelled, in self-defence, immediately to draw his blade, and place himself on guard. This he did with the practised grace and dexterity of an accomplished fencer, to which the bold but rough and apparently untutored attitude of Cromwell formed a singular contrast, and did not seem to augur altogether well for the parliamentary champion. And doubtless Edward Holte himself looked forward to a contest of skill and agility, to which his highly-trained experience promised him the victory in the quarrel thrust so unexpectedly and seemingly unreasonably upon him. And Firebrace in vain raised his voice in expostulation; and the smiths crowded towards the scene of action, in expectation of witnessing that most amusing of all spectacles to the popular eye, a hand-to-hand combat, when the whole affair came to as sudden a termination as the commencement.

Far from meeting his antagonist in the manner he evidently calculated, with all the finer tricks of assault and fence, Captain Cromwell brought his massive broadsword with so tremendous a force and clash upon the cavalier's bright but much slenderer blade that, to the infinite astonishment and chagrin of Edward Holte, it was in a manner dashed to pieces in his hand; and he found himself with little more than the hilt of his weapon left in his grasp, defenceless and unarmed, before his very slightly provoked but apparently strongly exasperated foe!

'Ho, so, even as I thought; yonder foreign kickshaw is no match for a blade of Tubal Bromycham's tempering, when he is in earnest at his work,' said Cromwell, apparently in nowise elated at his success, but adding, in a very calm and business-like manner, 'Do you yield you now, Master Holte, as my prisoner, or must I grapple with you for the mastery?'

'How mean you, rude man, speaking thus to an antagonist so foully and dishonestly taken at an advantage?' exclaimed young Holte, exasperated to a degree that removed him far beyond the restraint of prudence.

'Nay, then, it shall be man to man—a fair up-and-down wrestle, until I bind you as fast as Samson in your own love-locks!' returned Cromwell, suddenly casting away his own sword, and, yet more to the cavalier's astonishment, throwing himself with his whole weight upon him, and grappling him as if for a wrestling match,

The elegant but slender and youthful figure of the heir of Aston was certainly not fitted for such an encounter with the powerfully muscular, heavy, and matured frame of the Parliament officer. Yet he met a strong resistance, as if he too were not altogether unaccustomed to the species of contest : and although Cromwell several times lifted him with the force of a giant from his feet into the air, Edward contrived, with singular dexterity, always to alight again upon them ; and even at last, by an active manœuvre, which the captain seemed not to expect or understand, leaped fairly over his massive shoulder behind him. Reasonably then, considering that he had had enough of this kind of sport in so unfair a field, Edward Holte determined to make use of the opportunity to effect his escape. He therefore brushed through the group of staring Cyclopes—who, admiring his courage and dexterity, offered no hindrance—and rushed towards the exit of the smithy, where he expected to find his horses and armed servants.

And so, indeed, they were there, but gazing with a consternation of their own in quite a different direction to the one their master arrived in. And Edward also discerned, with no light increase of alarm and surprise, the approach of a great mob from the Bull Ring, which came pouring down Deritend in a strangely confused and tumultuous way ; neither had he time to reach up to the holsters of his saddle for the pair of pistols in it, ere again the powerful clutch of Cromwell pinioned both his arms down to his sides.

‘Whither away, my master?’ he exclaimed. ‘Let us have it out fairly. But here come readier and rasher allies for me than our worthy master armourer and his beef-brained hammerers. There’s a jolly, shouting mob, such as we frightened the King away from Whitehall withal ! On their lives, bid your serving-men keep the peace, or I will set the rabble on you in a fashion that—Ho, my master ! What ho, Tubal Bromycham ! in God and the Parliament’s names, aid me to make captives of these delinquent enemies to both.’

It was indeed the very rabble raised in commotion by the eloquent ravings of the Nottingham refugee, still headed by him and Tubal Bromycham, which now came pouring down Deritend in a shouting, laughing, yelling, limb-straining mass. For, having succeeded in effecting the overthrow of the supposed emblem of superstition, the rioters—so they might be called—had been further moved by some capricious impulse of the popular mind to resolve upon consigning the massive image, which they had found it impossible to destroy, to the waters of the Rea.

CHAPTER XI.

A PRISONER OF LOVE AND WAR.

TRUE to their proper mechanical genius, or instructed by their leaders, the Birmingham mobsters came drawing the ponderous image—which, otherwise, might possibly have offered a passive resistance of weight not easily to be overcome—on a set of iron rollers, placed and replaced

in the way with emulous zeal, with ropes round its neck and the rest of the prostrate main mass. Men dragged at these over their shoulders, furiously urged on in the good work by Wrath-of-God Whitehall, whose flimsy skeleton could give no other assistance, while Tubal Bromycham did the work of three strong men—or, rather, of the strongest cart-horse—in his actual person. In this manner engaged, the whole rabble, unluckily for Edward Holte, came rolling towards the Crown Forge at the very moment when his former foe had again seized him in his unkind embrace.

Tubal, hearing his name called in a voice which he very well knew, ceased his exertions, and as he was the main strength of the movement, the whole rabble came to a halt before Firebrace's house. And as the people followed their leader, again, in hurrying up to ascertain the meaning of the strange grouping at the gateway, Edward Holte found his line of retreat still more effectively cut off by their advance than his own seizure from behind.

Meanwhile, but perhaps rather to the increase of the cavalier's annoyance, the uproar had summoned a fairer auditor to the window projecting over the porch of the Old Crown. The lattice on one side of the window flew open, and Mistress Dorothy Firebrace looked out of it, with an expression of very great alarm and surprise, passing through many deepening shades in a single moment, as the aspect of things below more clearly struck her.

'Hillo, Master Cromwell! what is the matter here?' exclaimed Tubal, approaching; but, strangely enough, as his eye fell upon Edward Holte, his whole flushed and excited physiognomy lost its hues, and faded off into almost a deadly pallor!

Captain Cromwell lost no time in giving the required explanations, which he seasoned in a singularly artful manner, to win the adhesion and stir the exasperation of the already heated populace. But he addressed himself more particularly to Tubal. 'Now is the time, or never, Master Bromycham,' he said, with great eagerness, and more significance to the person he spoke to than was exactly to be discerned in the sense of his words; 'if you would deserve well of the Parliament in that great matter whereof we have had conference, to stand forth in its behalf, and enlist your famous and most serviceable town or only in the good cause!'

'Aye, aye, openly, openly!' yelled Whitehall. 'Whoso denieth me before men, I will deny him before my Father! What is the work in hand—the work in hand, I say, to glorify the Lord?'

To Edward Holte's very considerable surprise, Tubal made no response at first to the emissary of the Parliament's appeal. He looked at him, indeed, with a singular kind of steadfastness, and a shudder passed over his powerful frame as their eyes met. All this was, however, succeeded by a dark and angry flush of blood to his brow, and he exclaimed, 'Will he not go prisoner quietly? By Heaven, then, he shall feel my grip!'

'Shame on you, Tubal!—a thousand, thousand shames! So many on one defenceless and disarmed man!' exclaimed a voice at this moment from the window above—a female voice, but one full of the most

eloquent fervour of emotion and appeal. It was the voice of Dorothy Firebrace; and Edward, glancing up at the beautiful, but now passionately excited and indignant countenance, gave a mournful and yet involuntarily pleased and tender smile.

Tubal himself apparently shrunk from the rebuke. 'Nay, 'tis none of my doing, Mistress Firebrace,' he said, in rather grumbling and surly tones.

'Whose doing is it then? Not my father's! Is it this intrusive stranger's? And what has *he* to do to meddle among us, to the breach of all manners and decency towards a visitor and worthy neighbour of the town,' continued Dorothy, still highly excited. 'Where's my father? I see him not, or he would never suffer such insolencies to the son of his best and friendliest customer!'

'Heard man ever such a peal as this young girl's tongue rings out? Of a truth, ye of Birmingham must be the most henpecked husbands of all England, if the wives and matrons here keep the tune in their places!' exclaimed Cromwell. 'But, howbeit, these are not matters for women's meddling we are upon at present. Tubal, take the prisoner to the town limbo under the Welsh Cross, where I have myself ere now seen pickpockets and other malefactors bestowed. We will see to his proper looking after there. Come, sir, will you go like a man on two legs, or must you be dragged and hounded thither like a timorous calf into the slaughter-house?'

Edward glanced around him with eyes full of a very different expression—fierce with indignation and disdain. But the great array of rough force against him convinced him that further resistance on his own or his servants' part, would only provoke an overwhelming demonstration of the superior strength of his adversaries.

'Do no base harm to us, since you have us so unfairly at your mercy; and look for certain to receive such chastisement of your unlawful assault and detention of the King's subjects, as his Majesty will be at hand shortly, with an army at his back, to inflict,' said he, shaking himself loose from Cromwell's hold. 'I yield myself your prisoner, since I cannot help myself: but not to you, sir, not to you!' he concluded, casting off Tubal Bromycham's grasp on his shoulder in turn, though it was gentle enough, with a violent gesture of anger and disdain. 'I will walk quietly, under my protest, to your prison.'

It was very plain in Tubal's countenance that this action roused a corresponding feeling of anger, resentment, and retaliation in his bosom. He even clutched back his sinewy arm, with the fist doubled, as if prompted to return it, where it had been dashed from, with emphasis. But either some restraining impulse of his own better nature, or the arrival of Firebrace and his daughter, who made their appearance at this moment together from the porchway, arrested the first passionate movement; and a blow from Tubal Bromycham seldom required seconding.

On this arrival, it was at once obvious that his daughter's expostulations, which she had hurried from the window above to bestow on her sire, had produced a notable effect upon the armoured.

'Nay, Tubal, lad; be quiet, 'tis an unarmed man, Master Cromwell,

what you do is without due warranty. The young gentleman has in no way infringed upon our rights, or the customs of the trades of Birmingham. I am the master of the guild, and you cannot take him to the town lock-up without my orders or sanction.'

'Will you hold him yourself, then, prisoner in your house, Master Firebrace, and go with me to the town-hall, to ask your fellow-citizens their judgment in the matter? I do not wish you to take a single step but such as the whole town shall be ready and willing to stride a pace beyond with you in,' replied Cromwell, anxious above all things to implicate the master armourer in the transaction, and perceiving, in this suggestion, how to do so without startling the fears natural to all but the boldest and most determined spirits, in a solitary advance to danger.

'Oh, yes, yes, let Master Holte remain here, under my father's assurance and protection. He would not be safe in the hands of these savage rioters, and then shall my father have to stand forth and answer for all!' exclaimed Dorothy Firebrace, who appeared to dread nothing so much as to see the person of the heir of Aston placed in the custody of the exasperated multitude, whose unmanliness and violence were already so formidably exhibited, and among whom, as she well knew, the entire Holte name was extremely in distaste and opprobrium.

'I'm no jailer, Captain Cromwell; how can I take upon me this jailer's charge?' returned Firebrace, still not greatly relishing the part thrust upon him.

'Let the young man give his parole he will not attempt to leave your precincts, or the town, until we determine what is fittest to be done with him, and he will need no locks and keys. Being of so honourable a degree of gentility, his word may doubtless be taken for a commoner's bond!' said Cromwell, with a slight sneer. But Dorothy, turning to the cavalier, entreated him with so much passion and earnestness to accept the proposition, that he himself, not seeing how otherwise he could better his unfortunate position, and perhaps secretly tempted by the prospect of remaining within so pleasing a neighbourhood, lent some acquiescence to the arrangement.

'I will give you my word to remain in Armourer Firebrace's enclosures, on release or rescue, until you shall inform me of the good town's resolution, whether it purposes to break all the natural laws of kind neighbourhoodship and hospitality, as well as the King's, against me, or not; but nothing further. Do you take me into your charge on this footing, Master Firebrace—aye or no?'

'Truly, Master Holte, since it is of your own proffering, and you will bear me witness 'tis none of my doing or ordaining, but chiefly to save you from worse hands and treatment,' the armourer replied, still anxious to secure his retreat from his dangerous predicament between the opposing parties. 'Tubal, you also are as a testimony to me that I do nought in this as of my own free choice. Look not so wrathfully at the young man, but keep yourself clear in all respects of an outrageousness, which, perchance, Master Cromwell may sometime find it a hard matter to answer.'

'I will take care Master Holte escapes not from whatever resolves the town may come to on his score, Father Zachariah! that is all,'

returned Tubal ; adding in a hoarse tone, within his teeth, ' And I wot well I owe none of his name a better turn ! '

' Why, man, what harm has my name done to thee ? Oh, I remember now ; and has such black blood come down in your veins through the four generations of mortal men that have elapsed since then ? ' said Edward, looking scornfully at the famous blacksmith, whose animosity, he had no doubt, dated from the feud of a century old, the origin of which has been explained.

Tubal turned pale at the first part of this question, and Edward himself could not but feel that, although his eyes continued fixed fiercely upon him, the latter portion of his observation seemed scarcely to produce any effect upon him.

' What has your name done to me ? What has it done to me ? ' Tubal muttered indistinctly to himself, while sparks of fire flashed from his blue eyes, as they might under his own vigorous strokes from the forge. ' Well, no matter, no matter ! The day of vengeance must and shall come ! But not now, nor on an unarmed and defenceless man ! '

' Come into the house, sir, from this rude and angry jabble. I will be your willing, and yet most unwilling hostess, in my father's name, ' said Dorothy ; and it was not very clear whether her passionate glance did not single out her betrothed as the representative of the body of individuals to whom those unpolite epithets were applied. And she seconded her invitation even by so decisive a measure as to place her arm in Edward Holte's, and draw him gently from the throng towards the court-yard steps, ascending into the private residence of Armourer Firebrace.

' Good troth ! a lass who will take her own way like a spoilt only one as she is ! ' remarked Cromwell, looking discontentedly after the pair. ' Yet a lass of spirit, too, if she but showed it on the right side ! Good faith, Master Bromycham—which is no evil-minded, devil-obtesting cavalier oath, but a sober and godly calling to witness of the truth—Good faith, your betrothed needs some careful looking after in such good company ! And so we leave the young man, as you have said, in your earnest guardianship, while myself and Master Firebrace make known to the townsmen what is done in the affair, and ask their further counsel and support. Ho, there, which among ye here is the town-crier ; for, sure, he will make one in such an onset of marrowbones and cleavers as is here ? '

' Yea, verily ; I, though unworthy, am the man—*Accepted Clavers* by name ! ' said a voice from the throng, which sounded like the notes of a cracked trumpet, it was at once so shrill, dissonant, and devoid of control ; and a long, lean figure on crutches, with two wooden legs from about the middle of the lower division of the human frame, hopped and thrust itself forward.

' They did not choose thee, then, 'tis plain, when the town needed rapid intelligence, *Accepted Clavers* ! However, if the office be thine, do it with all diligence, and go round Birmingham town, and summon a full meeting of the worthy people thereof at the Guildhall, in the name of the Master Armourer Firebrace, ' said Cromwell, in accents of command which no one seemed now to dispute. *Accepted* himself—

who had probably been promoted to his office as a charitable provision after the loss of his limbs, in some of the dangerous manufactures of the town—instantly raised a large bell, and rang out a most formidable jangling peal, which he followed up by uttering the proclamation in proper official form, and hobbled off to spread it through the town. After this, Captain Cromwell paused merely to disarm the two astonished and panic-stricken domestics of Aston, whom he ordered to dismount, and directed Tubal to consign to the lock-up at the Welsh Cross. The horses themselves of these men, as well as that of Edward Holte, he seemed to seize upon as spoil of the Egyptians, for he ordered one of Firebrace's smiths to lead them to the inn where he lodged, behind St. Martin's, called the Black Boy and Woolpack. And the active agent of the Parliament completed his arrangements by walking off with the master armourer—almost evidently against his will—to the town-hall.

The mob, meanwhile, with characteristic inconstancy, hearing of what was up in that direction, abandoned the fallen statue in the roadway, and principally scudded off after the crier, leaving Wrath-of-God Whitehall vainly clamouring for assistance to complete the work of casting the profane image into the Rea. However, one of the faithful few who remained, and who seemed, by his rainbow-hued arms and apron, a dyer, offered the poor apostle shelter and food in his dwelling in Digbeth; which, in the relapse from his over-wrought feelings and disappointment, luckless Flotsam was glad to accept.

CHAPTER XII.

A PURITAN HOUSEHOLD.

WHILE the astute and daring parliamentarian thus alarmed the town, and summoned its principal citizens to a conference which he intended should produce momentous results, Dorothy Firebrace eagerly completed the rescue of the object of his first violent demonstration. Yet she was scarcely satisfied that Edward Holte was safe from the insults of the mob, until some time after she had escorted him into the interior of the house, and all noise of the tumultuous gathering had died away from the immediate neighbourhood of the Crown Forge. Until then, she seemed determined to keep him company—doubtless with a view to watch over his safety—very unusually reversing the relation of the sexes. And Edward Holte, who perceived her motive, was at once piqued and gratified with its effects. The latter feeling, to say the truth, much predominating, and leaving him very little disposed to find fault with whatsoever might be the consequence of so agreeable a result.

Armourer Firebrace's residence proved to be on as substantial and roomy a scale inside as out. The apartment Dorothy showed him into was very irregular in shape, and low in the ceiling, but it was of an extent that would be thought ample for half-a-dozen chambers in our day. It was the common sitting-room of the family, on the second story; and the primitive state of manners was evinced by a considerable recess in it being used as a kitchen, while other divisions were

evidently set apart as convenient store-rooms to supply the needs of the culinary art. About a third of the whole was as clearly assigned as a sort of parlour for the heads of the household, being paved with beautifully-flowered Dutch tiles, and very solidly furnished with table, settle, and chairs, of black oak, so heavy with material as almost to be immovable, and curiously carved with knots of oak leaves, oak apples, and acorns : the work, no doubt, of a remote period, from the look of the pieces, which were actually worn into sitting-places, like our modern Windsor chairs, by the simple pressure of the weighty generations that had successively occupied them.

The original appearance of the whole, to a modern eye, would have been completed by the sight of three or four distaffs set about the apartment, two of which were in actual use at the moment, under the nimble and dexterous managing of as many handmaidens of the armourer's establishment.

An old woman, who probably united the offices of cook and house-keeper—the same that had spoken to Edward Holte at the draw-well—was busied in some department of her art at the kitchen fire. Three massive doors seemed to open into contiguous chambers, and there were windows on each side, high and narrow, and cross-barred with iron, to form the lattice panes—so narrow, that when the fire-light glowed upon them, they looked little bigger, and quite as handsome, as good-sized rubies. Nor could they be opened from either inside or outside, sufficient air being supposed—and with reason—to be provided from the door communicating with the courtyard gallery, and the several wide open chimney-places of the chamber.

The women, young and old, looked with surprise at the visitor, while Edward, with the natural uneasy feeling of a prisoner, walked to the windows to see what they gave out upon.

One range, he found, overlooked the smithy yard ; the other a garden and orchard, of no great extent, and speedily bounded by the waters of the Rea.

Dorothy's interest in her handsome *protégé* had, meanwhile, not diminished with the cessation of any immediate danger to him. Perhaps, indeed, in the absorption of her mind, she thought so little of herself as not to reflect that she followed on Edward's steps with singular closeness, as if she had a right to be with him, and to guard him from any remaining possibility of harm.

'No,' she said, answering the cavalier's look, though he said nothing, after inspecting the windows, 'they will not open ; but, in recompense, if you close the door by which we entered, I doubt if all my father's smiths together, armed with their best crow-bars, could force a way in for hours ; and even then there is further retreat. The door yonder opens into our guest chamber, and is nearly as strong, with bolt and bar, as that to the open way.'

'You apprehend, then, still for me, Mistress Firebrace ?' said Edward ; adding with a mingled expression of shame and indignation : 'But, in truth, I am deprived of all defence by yonder powerful swash-buckler taking me so unfairly with his heavy metal against a common rapier.'

'Good troth, do I, Master Holte !' the fair damsel replied, speaking

in a low tone, as if she did not wish to be overheard by the other women present. 'The desperate man of whom you speak, and who has placed his head on the traitor's block by half that he hath already done, has evidently taken my father under his sway and urging; and my father is as a ship with full-spread sails for the blustering breeze that is abroad to catch and send headlong through the tempest. He has great influence also with Tubal Bromycham, my *betrotted husband*' (these latter words she pronounced with a degree of falter and hesitation that pleased Edward), 'and there are, I think, secret counsels and devices hatching between them. Then again, my father himself always suspects—I can gather, though he has never openly declared his thoughts to me—that Tubal has suffered some special wrong or indignity at the hands of Sir Thomas Holte, likely to render him bitter and exasperate against his son. Nay, I think something more than that old grudge between your names, for he scarcely ever alluded to that of old times; but since his dismissal from the works of Aston, I myself have heard Tubal give vent, as it were, in blurts of fire from a closed furnace, to a deep smouldering of hatred and revenge in his heart against that haughty gentleman, which it may well be he will not be sorry to find occasion to blaze forth upon the son.'

'Let him give me fair play—let any man—and I fear not the worst that mortal hate can devise against me!' returned Edward, with an angry flush. 'But what you say, as regards the worthy blacksmith, may be true. My father is a man of choleric temper and reckless impulses, and withal can hold to his feelings of revenge and bitterness as long as others of a calmer and slower implacability. But I should not speak this of a father, who, I know, will be driven to extremity by this outrage and insult in my person to his house.'

'And that is what I most fear,' said Dorothy, with sudden eagerness. 'Oh, Master Holte! it would put everlasting ill-blood between our names too—I mean, between the good town and Aston Hall, for ever—if Sir Thomas should attempt your rescue with a violent hand.'

'So it would, dear Mistress Firebrace, since you so kindly interest yourself in my favour. It is the very course Sir Thomas is likely to throw himself upon. It is not likely he will suffer me to remain in the hands of a brutish and violent mob, or to be dragged a prisoner to London at the behest of a member of the traitorous Parliament, to be detained as a hostage, and submit to what other ill usage their unlawful tyranny may determine upon.'

'What a dreadful equality of mischief, and on all hands!' said Dorothy, the tears springing in her glowing eyes. 'But the worst of it is, Master Holte, that unless your father has a much greater and readier force at home than any we have heard of in Birmingham, he will but rush upon his own destruction if he comes among us, as you think probable. At least, if that happens, which I am well assured will happen, and Captain Cromwell induces our townsmen to take to the arms, which you have yourself seen are in readiness for deadly wielding, even in unpractised hands.'

'It is very true,' said Edward, much struck by this view of things. 'The yeoman riders whom I am to form into a troop are still scattered

far and near in the farms and homesteads of our manors. No arms are as yet provided for them, and only plough horses and unbroken colts collected at Sutton ; yet my father is full likely to place himself at the head of his household servants, with a few rusty pikes and pitchforks in their hands, and rush unknowingly upon some great shame and disaster in the town !

‘But if Sir Thomas were warned of the danger—of the true state of things, think you he would persevere?’ said Dorothy, with peculiar earnestness.

‘He were mad to do so—especially as he knows well the King will speedily march this way with a competent force to the rescue of his faithful subjects in jeopardy—if only he could be made to see I am in no pressing immediateness of danger to life or limb ; for my liberty, fairest mistress,’ Edward concluded, with a resumption of all the warmth and gallantry of his manner in their first interview, naturally rekindled by the beauty and devotion to his service evinced by the lovely young creature before him, ‘I shall not regret it in a captivity embellished by so fair a presence.’

Dorothy blushed deeply, and replied, in an embarrassed undertone, ‘Oh, I am certain no ill of that kind will befall you while you are under the safeguard of my father’s roof. And if any of his family should do you the good service to warn your father against the rash extremities that are to be feared on his part, you will surely be a pleader with the King—should he show himself the master soon—to forgive what my father may be set upon to do by craftier and desperate men !’

‘I should need no other reason for interference of the sort than the remembrance that the master armourer is your father, gentle Dorothy !’ said the cavalier, in so sweet and languishing a tone that the fair Puritan lowered her eyes, while some sweetness seemed to flow, with a glide of honey, to her very heart.

‘But I will deserve the kindness, Master Holte,’ she replied, in tones that were indeed an unconscious echo of those addressed to her, ‘for I will myself undertake the business of warning Sir Thomas Holte against any rash onset on our prepared and armed town.’

‘You, Mistress Firebrace ?’

‘Hush ! speak low. Old Mahala has long been staring at us ; and though she be in a measure deaf, our handmaidens around have ears as nimble as mice in a pantry,’ said Dorothy, resuming. ‘Yes, I, sir—I alone. There is no one else in the town whom I could ask or trust to go upon such an enterprise. I can easily devise an excuse for a two-hours’ absence, and no more will be needed. I know the way well to Aston Hall, for I used often to ride there when a child, in my father’s carts, from the forge with Tubal. Nay, you yourself erewhile seemed to remember me on one of those visits—as, in good troth, I do well remember to have espied your honourable self, busy at your horsemanship in the chestnut paddock. On so wild a steed, methought, you flew, rather than rode, around the course.’

‘Was it there ? I thought it was in Birmingham I first thought you the loveliest child, as I now deem you the completest woman—I mean, I thought I remembered you first when I came to Birmingham with my

father concerning the suit of armour he sent us as a present and proof of the town's skill, and of his own gratitude for his baronetcy to my Lord of Buckingham. But he was slain by bloody Felton or ever he put it on, poor Duke !

'It was at Aston, howbeit, I remember *you* first—to say *remember* !' replied Mistress Firebrace, with an emphasis on the word that certainly meant a great deal more than the word itself. 'Neither is it far thither for a light-footed maiden, unaccustomed to any other conveyance than her own. All that is necessary is that you should give me some credential to your father—a letter, perchance, since you best know how to influence his mind—which I will most faithfully and assuredly deliver.'

'But if you should be found doing me this service, what will your townsmen judge of it ?'

'It matters little : they cannot harm me while my father is chief man in it. Nay, what can they wish for more themselves than to avoid a passionate onset from Aston ? Then, who could suspect Zachariah Firebrace's daughter of such an errand ? Neither do I run much risk—an insignificant girl—of being missed, in the present giddiness and turmoil of the town.'

Edward Holte was strongly moved and softened by this warmth of disinterested zeal on the part of a youthful woman towards one who, after all, was little other than a stranger to her a few hours previously. And this emotion quivered in all his utterance as he said : 'But I know not how I can have merited so kind an interest in my welfare, or what I can do to show my gratitude. Only, indeed, my father's resentment of the outrage put upon me may well be mollified by so much goodness, and a happy reconciliation be brought about. It is very plain that this presumptuous stranger, who has undertaken to rule the roost in Birmingham, desires nothing so much as to drive us all to open feud and hostilities. We will not play his game. I will write the letter, dear mistress, if you will furnish me with the means.'

'But it must be done out of observation,' said Mistress Firebrace, all her beauty brightening into strong relief in the lustre of satisfaction with which she felt that she had inspired. 'And now, in the great chamber yonder you will find all that is needful to refresh a wayfarer, and, moreover, pen, paper, and sealing-wax, as they were left by Master Cromwell, when of late Tubal and he were buried there in drawing up some statement of rights and wrongs—I know not well which on his part—to the Parliament.'

Better pleased than ever with the careless, almost the scornful tone, in which this last allusion was made to her betrothed and his pretensions, Edward Holte gratefully accepted the proffer ; and, advancing as he was directed, speedily found himself in the best bedchamber of the house, which, in those rude and barbarous times, was always dedicated to the use of the guest and stranger.

Dorothy remained for some minutes plunged in reverie at the farthest window, where this colloquy had taken place, chiefly in too low a tone to be overheard even by the evidently curious female listeners. Then, almost starting back to consciousness, she desired old Mahala to hasten and serve the dinner ; and, murmuring something about intending her-

self to go to the Cherry Orchard (a noted place of sportive resort in the fruit season for the young people of both sexes, at that time, in Birmingham), she seemed to think she had given reason enough for retiring to dress herself in a suit of bettermost out-of-doors apparel.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOROTHY'S MISSION.

To the astonishment, and almost, indeed, alarm of the old housekeeper, Mistress Firebrace made no secret, on her return, of her intention to dine at once with the stranger guest, without awaiting her father's arrival home.

'He will most likely be detained long by the town's riotous doings to-day at the Guildhall, Mother Mahala,' the armourer's daughter observed in her usual familiarly affectionate style to the old woman, who had been a servant in the family long before she was born, 'and I am sure he would not be pleased his guest should be kept so long waiting, for a sorry meal at best, since my marketing was so spoiled. And so, Mahala, I want to be away to the Cherry Orchard in time to have the sun about me when I come home. Tamar Mortlock and Thanks-be-Middlemore are both to be there, and tell me 'tis the rarest junketing in nature to pluck the fresh fruit with one's own hands from the trees there.'

Even this was not wonderful enough, in the way of departure from precedents. When Mahala was ready to serve dinner, the young cavalier having re-entered, refreshed from his day of dust and unexpected contest, the housekeeper desired one of her handmaidens to summon Master Bromycham—evidently an unusual proceeding; but Dorothy Firebrace again interfered, and with the firmness and mastery of one who meant to be obeyed. 'No, Ringan,' she said, 'go not. Tubal is of those who have violently, and belike unlawfully, imprisoned this gentleman. He will scarcely care to break bread with him.'

By this time, of course, the meaning of the cavalier stranger's appearance and entertainment in the house had spread in the Firebrace establishment, and the observation ought not to have excited so much surprise. But things were very methodically conducted there, and so marked a departure from the set-down rule could not but make the folks wonder.

Dorothy, however, who, as has been seen, was a girl of independent and resolute character, concerned herself little about opinions which could not be enforced. She seated herself at table with Master Holte, at his earnest solicitation, though she at first seemed as if she did not purpose to join him at the meal, but to see that he was well attended to. And the handsome pair were soon engaged over their viands in an earnest and close conversation.

Edward informed his fair hostess that, agreeably to her desire, he had written a letter to his father, containing the most favourable account he could deliver of his arrest and present condition, and pointing out the

danger of any interference in his behalf, without an adequate force, in the mutinous and revolted state of Birmingham, accompanied with a full recital of the exceeding kindness he had received at the hands of the young damsel, Master Armourer Firebrace's daughter, who had generously consented to carry the warning he proposed to give to his dear parent at Aston Hall. He had then stated the reasons, including the presence of an active agent of the Parliament, which rendered it dangerous and hopeless to attempt a forcible rescue, and his earnest request that none such might be attempted until the King's arrival with his army in full force might render resistance useless, and therefore not likely to be attempted. In conclusion, Edward Holte stated—and no doubt with perfect truth—that he recommended his fair and most kindly and well-intentioned messenger to his father's highest respect and hospitable entertainment.

All this greatly delighted the object of the recommendation ; and she listened, without any weariness, to Edward Holte's further reiterated counsels in the matter. He speedily, however, ascertained that she was thoroughly conversant with the way to Aston Hall, all that he found it advisable to say to her on that score being reducible, at last, to two points—one being not to approach any herd of grazing deer, which at that season were dangerous, and to keep the lower pathway of the park. There was also a very savage bull, he said, kept company with the kine over a portion of the upper ground, but he had seen it safely enclosed in a paddock in the morning. She could easily perceive it at a distance, and avoid the spot. Dorothy smiled, and said that every one had heard of the Bull of Aston, from its having gored several trespassers who had come upon it unawares—without, however, alluding to the strong belief in the town that Sir Thomas at times permitted the savage creature the range of his park, to diffuse a salutary, indistinct awe of its presence, against the not unfrequent night-maraudings after his game.

But the second branch of Edward Holte's counsel concerned a different class of harmful creature ; so, at least—in spite of the guarded expressions he employed—it was pretty plain he considered his illegitimate brother, Richard, who, it appeared, was not graced with the family name, in addition, but bore his mother's disgraced one of Grimsorwe.

'My father's youth was full of wild distempered heats, which scarcely, even now, the snow that hangs upon his beard has something cooled,' Edward Holte said, apologetically ; 'and Richard is his son, by a poor country wench, who came by an untimely end through her own impatience and melancholy, when my father married my mother, a lady of his own degree. Richard is my elder, so, and perchance owes me some grudge for the fitting legal preferences I enjoy, and it may be his mother's evil haps also ; for though Sir Thomas, in a sort, acknowledges him as his issue, and, taking compassion on his orphaned estate, reared him partly with me at the hall, almost as a gentleman of equal degree (scarcely to my lady-mother's satisfaction), still Richard never was much more to me than a sullen and unwilling schoolfellow with our masters ; never a pleasant playfellow in our younger years, or companion in more advanced maturity. So that we were both well pleased when

my father's appointment of our different conditions in life—he to be a lawyer, I a soldier—finally separated us in our jutting-ribbed and unwilling yoking together. But, trust me, I do not think Richard's abode in London among the scriveners, and his courses there, have tended to make him a better man or a truer brother, though by a left-handed kinsmanship, as 'tis. I am sure he envies bitterly still at my undeniable heirship and rights, as my father's eldest lawfully-born son. It was but this very morning I had a snarling with him at my setting forth, which induced my fair haughty sister to take up a sneering challenge on his part, and equip me with those Queen's marigolds, which have found so much worthier a possessor now. But, for these reasons, I advise you not to make so subtle and ill-disposed a gownsman any party in this controversy with your angry town. And for another better, or rather worse cause,' the young heir of Aston continued, with a vague but singularly strongly excited sentiment of jealousy kindling amid that first bright flame that had invaded his bosom, 'I rede you, if possible, keep your fair self out of Dick Grimsorwe's bold and greedy eyeshot; for I have heard tales of his doings in London—and not reported either by ill-wishers, Sir Thomas taking too much delight in such discourse—that show he is my father's true son in all that regards women, as I trust I am myself my own pure and high-born mother's. But Richard takes a bastard's view, I misdoubt, in every and all things! Of this no more at present, dear Mistress Firebrace, since I see it troubles you: but, beholding how fair you are, and knowing what dis-esteem my brother merits, rather than Sir Thomas's boisterous applause, for his unbridled gamesomeness of the kind—which is not gamesomeness, either, for he even sins like a gownsman, with a certain gravity and solemnity of wickedness—I could not but utter some words of warning also in that respect.'

'I thank you, sir,' said Dorothy, who had coloured violently during these latter observations, 'but can but think your favour discerns in me allures which will remain invisible to all other eyes; and hope that in anywise you speak less brotherly in this than even so disgraced a half-blood may fairly claim. But have you the letter ready?' she concluded, in a lower tone, though the younger handmaidens kept at a respectful distance, whirring at their wheel, during the repast, and Mahala had fallen asleep to the click-clack music of her unstopped smoke-jack. 'I would be afoot and away before my father's return.'

Edward perceived the necessity of the case, and though very loth to part with his fair companion, produced the rescript in question, on the demand, from beneath his cloak. It was duly folded, and sealed with the family coat of arms and crest, which he carried in a signet ring—the squirrel munching a nut, surrounded by the Holte motto—certainly of a significance seldom more inappropriately bestowed—'*Exaltavit humiles*' ('The humble shall be exalted.')

Dorothy then disappeared for a few moments into another of those principal doors which it was right to suppose admitted into her own private apartment; and shortly after reappeared in a long mantle and hood, the usual going-out costume of the class she belonged to. Only, as the Puritans had set their faces against all lively colours and gaiety

in apparel, the armourer's daughter had been obliged to content herself with a soft grey woollen stuff ; which, however, she had so judiciously fitted and folded to her frame, that it became her like the changeable plumage of a wood-pigeon. Edward Holte, indeed, made some such gentle remark, in tones as soft and cooing as a loving mate of the kind might in a leafy covert, lending the maiden his hand the while to escort her to the gallery exit. Beyond that, she would not suffer his attendance ; not, certainly, for lack of a goodwill to hear more such sweet words, warbled so tenderly !

But Dorothy need not have been so apprehensive of observation. On descending in the stithy-yard she was surprised at the silence that reigned in a place usually so noisy, and which in the absorption of her own attention upstairs she had not hitherto noticed. Most of the forge-fires were also at a very low fuelling, and some of them were burned out. A little hump-backed urchin, who usually officiated as a bellows-blower, remained the sole representative of perhaps a score of strong-boned smiths ; and he it was who informed the young mistress of the Old Crown that the master armourer had sent for Tubal and all the rest of his men to the market-place.

These tidings confirmed Dorothy in her conviction that Captain Cromwell would retain and use his ascendancy in the councils of the town, and hastened her own resolves. But, aware now of the movement in it, Dorothy only proceeded a short distance in her pretended direction to the Cherry Orchard to deceive any observation that might follow her, and then turned aside into the fields along the winding course of the Rea, which she knew would conduct her, though not so easily as by the highway through Birmingham, to Aston Hall.

Dorothy Firebrace was not a girl of modern nerves, but a healthy, blooming, vigorous, generous-hearted young woman of her own times, who had no species of dread of anything but real and tangible danger, and not much of that. A girl of perhaps too sudden and passionate impulses, but of unquailing constancy and resolve in carrying out whatever her warmer feelings and energetic imagination suggested either as a duty of heart or honour. As an indulged only child, she was also accustomed to follow the bent of her own will, and pursue more solitary and unsupported courses of action than the members of numerous families are wont. Consequently the knowledge that she was pursuing a purpose of her own, which she considered just and kind, was a sufficient incentive and encouragement to her, and the silence and solitude of the then unfrequented pathways from Deritend to Aston Park, had no alarms for her.

The inclosure alluded to extended, at this period, almost to the present goods station of the London and North-Western Railway, instead of forming a boundary a mile and a half, or more, beyond it. Consequently Dorothy Firebrace was not long before she reached an opening in the park palings, which was entered by a stile from Birmingham, and was the usual adit to a footpath conducting, for ordinary purposes of communication, to the Hall. The way then became certainly exceedingly lonesome. Anon, even the companionship of the river deserted her ; and as Aston Park had not been inclosed from

common-land during many years, this part of the journey assumed then a very dreary aspect. A hillocky waste, still covered chiefly with furze and stunted underwood, was before her, which was some time before it changed gradually into a flow of richer meadows and woodland, liberally planted, but with still young and scantily-grown wood.

By-and-by, however, the character of the scenery underwent a new mutation, as Dorothy's light and rapid step conducted her nearer to the ancient settlement of Aston, a manor and lordship that has been the seat and residence of several families of distinction so far back as the Anglo-Saxon era. Sir Thomas Holte had, in fact, cleared away an ancient ruinous mansion, erected by one Godmund, before the Conquest, to make room for his span-new edifice. But, with better taste than has been evinced by its modern many-headed proprietary, left most of the towering ancient wood and scattered trees of his predecessors standing—a loss nothing can now repair, the axe having levelled, in a few days' strokes, the slow product of centuries.

Dorothy had now to pass through a wood of such extent, before reaching the Hall, that it was almost entitled to the more dignified appellation of forest. And this stretched along a great reach of country, in a direction below the species of elevated platform on which the mansion stood, considerably into the neighbouring county of Stafford; besides thickly screening it on the side towards Birmingham. This lighter and more scattered part of the wood was to be traversed by Dorothy Firebrace, and then she considered more than three lengths of her journey would be happily over. It was closely in view; but before arriving there, the armourer's daughter was destined to come upon an adventure not a little trying, even for mettle dauntless as was hers.

She had left a mill some distance behind, turned by water-power, at a place where there is now an extensive manufactory known as the Aston Brook Works, when the girl's attention was suddenly caught by hearing an extraordinary trampling sound approaching her; and she had hardly time to spring up a sandy hedging of the pathway, which at this point was broad and deeply plunged into the ground, ere she perceived a great number of deer rush clattering past, as if from the pursuit of some fiercer animal—either dog or man, Dorothy thought; but had scarcely time to congratulate herself on her escape from so undistinguishing a flight and encounter, ere she was herself seized with a much keener kind of alarm than she would have felt from either class of pursuit, by the more portentous apparition of the ferocious Bull of Aston! It came careering madly along the road, with its monstrous head and horns lowered for goring whatever it might encounter worth the trouble—the saliva flinging in great flakes of foam from its large tongue whenever it tossed its head up, which it did as often as it thought it advisable to keep up the terrors of the pursuit with a dreadful bel-
lowing.

The creature's rage had probably been excited by too presumptuous an approach, on the part of the deer, to its private inclosures; and it had broken bounds to repel the invasion of its rights, as probably it considered the exclusive use of that pasture; or perhaps the scent of the deer at this season offended the pure nostrils of a member of the ox

tribe. Dorothy Firebrace paused not to reason on the why and the wherefore, but betook herself at once to flight. Whither, she scarcely heeded, and probably hardly knew, merely adopting the only turn on the rugged road she was aware of, and which she remembered to have passed about midway between this unlucky spot and the water-mill.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WITCH OF ASTON.

DOROTHY'S almost flying footsteps luckily gained the by-path considerably ahead of the dreadful animal, and it thundered past the turning like a cannon ball on its errand of destruction. But such was the dismay the sight of the headlong mass of brown and horns excited even in her courageous nature, that when at last she ventured to pause for breath, the armourer's daughter could not make up her resolution to return and resume the beaten way across the park to Aston Hall. She dreaded—and it was likely enough—that wearied of its chase, or stopped by the roaring waters of the mill brook, the beast would return, and retrace the road to its pastures or the herd of cows, which Dorothy had observed dotting the country before her to the skirts of Aston Wood. Imagining, therefore, that her safest progress would be to continue on the by-path, which evidently led to some outlet, until she could ascertain the position of the mansion, and make for it by some roundabout, she did so. But advancing over some very rough and deep-rutted ground, she observed that it began to descend rapidly, and by degrees to grow shaded and closed in with very lofty and ancient trees. Dorothy concluded, therefore, that she had actually entered Aston Wood by an indirect route, and that if she could only fall upon a path turning off in the direction of the one she had been driven from, she should be able to reach the hall along the bottom of the valley, as easily almost as if she had continued on the upland.

With this idea, she again hastened her pace, and though the road began to get swampy and grass-overgrown under the shadow of the trees, the light-footed maiden thought very little of these difficulties. But trimly picking her way, proceeded at a pace that ought speedily to have conducted her to her destination, had she not been deceived in her notion of the probabilities of the ground, for, instead of arriving at a cross path to ascend safely from the wood, she came at last, to her surprise and vexation, upon the margin of an extensive pool of water.

The great circumference of this pool almost entitled it to be considered as a lake. Of artificial creation, it is true, as pretty plainly appeared from its accurate ovalling, and the smooth belt of verdure that ringed it in, and the regularly planted rows of chestnut and lime trees bordering its circuit. There were also elaborately twisted rustic seats placed under some of the leafier foresters, and a handsome boat-house was built on the edge—a sort of miniature in wood, in the style of the Aston Hall mansion house, with its minareted roof. Dorothy easily recognised this, and perceived at once that she was in a portion of the Pleasaunce

(as it was called) known as the Fish Stews ; but on the wrong side of the water from the Hall, the variegated summits of which she now perceived, crowning an eminence above the tops of a thick intervening woodland on the other side.

As has been remarked, the pond was of an extent that greatly perplexed Dorothy Firebrace at the notion of having to make its round to reach Aston Hall ; but there seemed no better to be done at first, until proceeding some distance she perceived something not quite at the further end, on her right, that resembled a bridge, over a narrowing neck of the water ; and she directed her steps, without further loss of time, thither.

This whole scene was entirely new, in its present ornamental arrangement, to Dorothy Firebrace, being part of the improvements carried out by Sir Thomas Holte, after he had finished his mansion inside and out. There had been a swampy lake there always, but now the margin of the pool was level, well-drained into the water-bed, and as green as emerald. The August sun was still lustrous in the sky, though tending downward, and piercing the trunks of the trees with splendid transverse gleams of light. It was a pleasant, though a solitary scene ; and so continued for a good stretch of the broad silvery expanse, where the numerous finny inhabitants leaped and disported themselves in pursuit of their humming and gilded prey.

But on a sudden Dorothy Firebrace was aware she was coming on a very strongly opposed change of appearance in the scene. The bridge, as she had supposed what she saw at a distance, proved on a nearer approach, to be a series of wooden piles, set in a descent of water from a higher and far gloomier upper pool, of limited extent, indeed, bearing to the larger about the relation of the head to the body, but so hemmed in and blackly overshadowed by ancient wood and underwood, that it seemed as if the confined water was in reality a huge blotch of ink ! Dorothy considered to herself they must be very dismal fish indeed that abode in this receptacle ; but, perceiving that the timber heads of the weir were crossed by planks at convenient intervals for stepping, she had no doubt these were used as a bridge and took heart to proceed.

Approaching the weir, the path suddenly took a plunge into a very thick and tangled piece of brushwood ; emerging from which, Dorothy found herself, not without some satisfaction, at the back of a cottage, close on the water, that she had not hitherto observed. To say truth, it was little better than a hut of the very poorest description, such as might, at some period, have furnished a game or fish watcher a wretched shelter against wind and rain of a night. It was formed of branches of trees, wattled together and plastered with mud, with a thatched roof that sloped almost to the ground, and was covered with a beautiful, but damp and unwholesome, coating of the brightest green moss.

The sight of any species of human habitation was not, however, without attraction for Dorothy at this moment, though she doubted very much whether this could be inhabited. Conceiving that if, nevertheless, it was, she might make inquiries that would enable her to avoid further risk of mistaking her way, the astray armourer's daughter was about to cross round to what appeared to be the front of the hovel, when her

attention was even startled by the sudden emergence of two figures before it.

They were, in fact, a duality of very remarkable appositions, and one of them a sufficiently unlikely personage for the scene.

This latter was still a young, but thoroughly matured man, as appeared from his firm and energetic stand and general gait; tall and well-made, but with a remarkable slouchant and skulking carriage of the head, that perhaps attracted more attention to it than a bold and upright bearing might. Then, when you looked at the face, you were struck with a yet stronger sense of puzzle and doubt, at perceiving a countenance, handsomely featured in the main, but disfigured by the livid pallor of the complexion, and a dark, lurking, insidious glance.

This person was garbed—as was then the constant custom among members of that learned profession—in a lawyer's robe, such as is now worn only in court. But underneath it, it was plain, he wore a sword and high boots, like a cavalier of the time. Yet the weapon stuck out awkwardly behind him; and with the general sombre cast of his figures, suggested the idea of an evil intelligence disguised at all points, saving the 'irrepressible' tail.

This notion flashed hurriedly on Dorothy Firebrace's mind, and arrested her advance by a kind of instinctive forbidding, luckily before she had come out from the shadow of the trees and underwood massed at the turning to the weir-dam; and it was greatly heightened in her fancy by a recognition she made of the lawyer's companion, almost in the same glance. And, no wonder, since it was an old woman who enjoyed, far and near Aston, the then very dangerous reputation of a *witch*!

And, in truth, Maud Grimsorwe, such was her name, had all the outward appearance men's minds were wont, in those days, to associate with the kind of evil human-supernatural. She would have been tall, had she stood upright, but she was bent nearly to a bow with age and infirmity, and her strangely haggard, lean, and yet infinitely wrinkled and puckered face, seemed to turn upward, almost from her waist, like a snake's from a darting curve. The old woman's singularly gleaming and lucid eyes greatly heightened this effect, coupled with the malicious and hateful expression of her countenance, which seemed formed for that of envious and revengeful passions. Her costume was in keeping with these personal characteristics, consisting chiefly of a gown that appeared as if fashioned out of some worn-out old patchquilt, it hung in such motley tatters about her haggish frame. The cone-shaped hat, over a discoloured, loose linen cap, that revealed her matted white locks, and the stick on which she leaned her tottering weight, were precisely such as we see ascribed to Mother Hubbard in the child's book. And, if not provided with a dog, like the heroine of that easy-rhymed legend, the Witch of Aston—so she was universally styled—cherished the society of a large black tom-cat, that mewed frightfully after her, and seemed, like its mistress, of some unknown age, and withered and starved to a frightful bony and hide-bound feline anatomy.

On her former visit to Aston, Dorothy Firebrace had more than once had this Warwickshire Sycorax pointed out to her as a dealer in forbidden

and wicked arts and spells. She lived a solitary and shunned existence, saving, it was supposed, by such as needed her vicious aid in their exigencies. And the report may even be believed in our enlightened days (as they are stated to be), that, from her study and familiarity with herbs, the old woman was in possession of certain secrets, which she exercised to her own profit, and the dreadful depravation, morally and physically, of divers unhappy young creatures who resorted to her, for the means to obviate and conceal the consequences of indulgence in unlicensed passion.

So, at least, vague but horrible rumours ran all over the country-side concerning old Maud Grimsorwe. It was a sneer well understood in Birmingham, when a girl, or unmarried woman, was told she ought to pay a visit to the Witch of Aston! But nothing, of course, was ever clearly known or proved against the supposed abettor or contriver of the imputed enormities, or else the power and influence of Sir Thomas Holte himself might not have availed to shelter Maud from the due punishment of her offences; and it might be supposed likely to be exerted in this terrible old lady's behalf, in consequence of her being the mother of the mother of his illegitimate son.

And yet, on the other hand, there was a well-supported belief that Sir Thomas Holte, during one portion of his career, was at bitter feud and hostility with the Witch of Aston.

She was said to be the last lineal descendant of those Grimsorwes who had usurped the inheritance of Aston from the wife of that deprived Lord of Birmingham who was ancestor of Tubal Bromycham. Her husband, who was also her cousin—it was he who had signed away the poor last vestiges of the family rights to Sir Thomas Holte; all but a scanty piece of ground of which his extravagance and villany could not deprive his wife and co-heiress. Precisely, indeed, the upper one of the Aston fish pools—that dark and secluded lakelet Dorothy had remarked—where the finny tribe were spawned and waxed large, to supply the lower preserve. Sir Thomas had tried to secure this also; but a protracted lawsuit, resulting in the triumph and ruin of the weaker party, had established old Maud Grimsorwe firmly in a possession which nothing, it appeared, could induce her to relinquish.

In reality, the old woman, with the recollection of the rights of her name, and the wrongs she had suffered in the person of her only child, her own bitter plainings of them, was much such an eyesore on Sir Thomas Holte's handsomely-rounded properties, as Mordecai presented at the exalted Haman's gates. Because *he* was there—poor, shivering, miserable representative of a down-crushed people—Haman had no joy of his life. Neither had Sir Thomas Holte, seemingly, for a long time, while this unhappy and injured hag persisted in retaining her position in the very midst and heart of his grand acquisitions.

But the result of two trials, the invincible obstinacy of his antagonist, and, possibly, the friendly interceding of her relative, Richard Grimsorwe, as he advanced in life, with his father, had finally procured the Witch of Aston such peace as her own bitter memory-gnawed heart, her own implacable spirit, and the general suspicion and hatred of her neighbourhood allowed,

These were the persons whom Dorothy Firebrace spied in colloquy together near that congenially dark and melancholy upper pool ; for after a single glance the conviction struck her, without the slightest pause of doubt, that the male party in it was the one described to her by Edward Holte as his unkindly-natured, base-born brother, Richard Grimsorwe, grandson of the Witch of Aston, by the mother's side.

CHAPTER XV.

A CALIBAN OF THE MIND.

THIS fact soon became apparent. While Dorothy remained motionless, partly in surprise and partly under the influence of an unaccountable impulse of curiosity, behind the hut, the two persons in front of it appeared to resume a conversation interrupted for the moment by the action necessary, on one part at least, in passing from under its low roof.

'Leave me now, grandmother. Your ceremony of attendance thus far is ample for the state and magnificence of your abode, and I would not that any stray eyes should mark us in such friendly commune and kinsmanship together. You know my father's jealous nature, and how he preserves his rancour against you still. He never forgives the crossing or thwarting of his will in any matter, and your obstinate holding of this upper water almost balances his happiness in the possession of all the other inheritance of our name at Aston.'

'I trust it doth—truly, I trust it doth,' returned the old woman, with inexpressible bitterness of accentuation, but not in the tone of a person of her apparent class, who had been born in it. 'For what else deem you, Richard, have I preserved it, tooth and nail, so long from his avacious clutch? Think you it is made precious to me by being the darksome grave of my only child, your mother, driven to cast herself into its black depths by falsehood and desertion of the treacherous tyrant himself, who would now so fain wrest that last vestige from me, to turn, no doubt, like all the rest, into a gay pleasaunce for his haughty dame and her handmaidens to disport in, with their companies of gamesome lovers and servitors?'

'You do well, grandmother ; yet it is but a poor revenge for so great an injury,' returned Richard Grimsorwe, with rather a sneer in his tone.

'But 'tis not all—I have done what else lies in me ! How else have six goodly sons and daughters, born unto Sir Thomas Holte in his fine new palace, perished of no other known cause save the curse in my heart, or ere they left the cradle or the crib?' the old woman replied, and her eye lighted up with a glare that strangely combined the luridness of insanity with a malice and hatred that revealed a full rational consciousness of the meaning of her words. And Richard Grimsorwe's reply, in its deadly sneeringness and calm, betokened even a deeper and more malignant phase of the same feelings.

'Tut, Mother Maud ! he said, 'cheat and affright the country loobies around you with stuff like this !—If your curses had power to kill, why

have you left the main hindrance and prevention of my prospects of so vast and wealthy an inheritance—yon fine legitimate heir of ours—alive and well, and in flourishing years of manhood, to flaunt it over me, and shame me the more significantly by his excellences before all the world, with my bastardy !

‘Ay, Edward Holte lives ! But not in spite of curses. I have never cursed him yet !’ returned the old woman.

‘And wherefore not, I pray you ?’ rejoined the base-born brother, but still baser-hearted man ; and in spite of his recent contemptuous repudiation of the popular feeling on the subject, one could hardly help thinking, from the earnestness of his query, that Richard Grimsorwe placed some superstitious faith of his own in the Witch of Aston’s imputed powers to ban and destroy. ‘And wherefore not ? One single lawful madam’s issue is as much a total barring to my inheritance—the restoration of the honour of my mother’s name—as a thousand whelps of the brood ! Yea, all the manor and even allodial lands would fall to that haughty princess and duchess in her own conceits, scornful Arabella Holte—mere woman as she is—were Edward gone, rather than to me. Nay, I have no part nor share in my father’s inheritance but such as his good-will may assign me as to a perfect stranger and alien in blood. And how far that may extend, what hopes may I form when—to humour his proud lady’s jealous disdains—he denies me even so poor a privilege as to bear his name.’

‘His name ! his name !’ repeated the old woman, with scornful emphasis catching at the word. ‘What is Thomas Holte’s name to bear ? A Birmingham blacksmith’s of some hundred years’ gentility ! You should be prouder to retain your mother’s, Richard Grimsorwe ! For we were lords of all these lands five centuries ago, and the Crusader who lies with his crossed knees in the church yonder (which I will never pray in while God lets men like *that man* give Him thanks in it for their triumphant wickedness !), is our direct ancestor—a Grimsorwe, of Aston, who was with Richard the Lion Heart in the Holy Land.’

‘Had I come honestly by my name, good grandmother ! But so foul a blotch of bastardy on it something mars the splendour,’ returned Richard Grimsorwe, who seemed, from some undefined motive of his own, to dwell on this exasperating expression. So it evidently was to old Maud.

‘Ay, ay,’ she muttered, with the indistinctness of age and intensely roused emotion. ‘A bastard, a bastard ! The blacksmith’s descendant has brought disgrace and infamy also on the name whose inheritance he has devoured ! You are right, Richard, my curses are powerless ! Or where would Thomas Holte be now, could curses kill men’s bodies, and sink their souls to the abyss !’

‘It would profit me much, indeed, to have a father removed and a brother to lord and rule it over me instead, who I know hates and despises me,’ said Richard, with his customary sneer, in reply to the old woman’s raging outburst.

‘Doth Edward Holte so by you, Dickon, Dickon, my poor boy ?’ she replied, with a rather doubtful quaver in her aged voice. ‘Muthought he was kind and well-wishing to all. It was his childish interference on

my behalf, when Cuthbert Bangster was stoning me for having bewitched his cattle, that moved me to spare *him* alone of all his race from the curses which I found could slay ! Or else, was it that I was even myself weary of curses, when the sixth fair babe was put into the cold black earth, and I heard the mother's broken-hearted sobbings over the grave ? I remembered, then, mayhap, how I felt when they brought me home my only child—my pretty Maud—dead, drowned—her yellow hair streaming with weeds and darnel from the pool ! But not as was my wont, with a renewal of hatred and vengeance in my poor old withered heart ! And so it was I did not utter the spell when my imps brought me word, for the seventh time, that a man child was born lawful heir to Aston Hall.'

'You wronged your own blood there then—most bitterly wronged it, grandmother!' said Richard Grimsorwe. 'But talk not of your imps, foolish old woman, which are but the dreams and fancies of your dotage; for if these religious times, which I foresee at hand, should come to pass, they may bring your grey hairs to the stake. Or have you never heard the text, "*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*?"'

'But thou wilt not suffer them to harm thy grandam, now, Richard, Richard, my own cunning and law-bred lad, now, wilt thou?' the old woman answered wheedlingly, as if confiding greatly in the powers evoked, but with manifest alarm. And, indeed, it was an age fraught with dangers of the most terrible kind to pretenders to supernatural influences, when, as mostly happened, they were poor and defenceless creatures in every external respect.

'What refuge is there in me, mother ? What power have I either to save or harm any one as I am now ?'

'Nay, come, nay, now, you are as great with your father as I am mean and hateful in his sight. And no man dares harm one in this country whom Sir Thomas Holte in any sort abides by !'

'And, say you so, Granny Grimsorwe?' returned Richard, with a singular mixture of mockery and solemnity in his accents. 'But you wot not how the times are changing ! I have watched them well, and think not, as my father does, that one bloody overthrow in an open field, and mayhap some knocking at the gates of London with lance and culverin, will set the King there again, in prouder sway and supremacy than ever. Nay, from the seething of men's blood, and the infinite hoarding of fire in their breasts unto some great mindquake, I gather, rather, that quite new times are coming to pass in England, and that the old system of things will be clean swept away. Sir Thomas Holte will abide by the old and worn-out landmarks, doubtless, and full likely will be swept away with them in the great rising tide.'

'Let that destruction come, and I care not what else follows !—the great deluge again, or the universal swallowing up into hellfire of this wicked and woful earth !' returned the beldame, with a truly ferocious, tigress-clattering of her still white and singularly sound teeth, testifying to the original goodness of a constitution that had survived so much that grief and poverty and age have of most grievous and hard to be borne.

'Tush ! you talk like an old fool ! But there is a way, indeed, if your thoughts were not altogether taken up with the prospect of so

savourless a feast of revenge, by which not only might I become as a tower of strength and refuge to my friends, but redeem your name and my own, grandmother, from its ignominy, and inherit, without soiling my hands with kindred blood, the broad lands that should be mine !

‘How so, son? You speak to me now greater marvels than any witchcraft can work !’ said Maud Grimsorwe. But the eagerness with which she listened for the reply was not unmatched closely in her neighbourhood, though, witch as she pretended to be, or was supposed by superstition, little she dreamed how Dorothy Firebrace, almost imagining herself to have been brought by Providence to the spot, for the detection of an atrocious conspiracy, held her breath and listened too. Indeed, with the additional stealthiness of fear, for Dorothy felt she had already heard enough to excite the dread and rancour of the plotting pair to perhaps mortal extremities.

‘Marvels, granny ! What marvels are there which a resolute mind and will cannot bring to pass ? Specially in troubled times like these, when all things are turning topsy-turvy ?’ Grimsorwe resumed, and with a slowness and deliberation in his manner that seemed to indicate he was not uttering a mere impulsive thought of the moment, but one long planted and matured in his mind. ‘Listen, grandmother ; am I not my father’s eldest-born ? and, were I lawfully so, his heir ? And have I not heard you say many times that Sir Thomas Holte promised my mother marriage ere he led her astray ; aye, and in the presence of witnesses ?’

‘Even so,’ replied the old woman, in a surprised and anxious tone ; ‘it is a common trick of the seducer. In the presence of one witness, at all events, for Adam Blackjack, the master-cook that now is at Aston, was called up into Sir Thomas’s presence to bear witness to his oaths and promises when my poor girl was abiding with her worthless father at Sutton, where he was at the time under-keeper of the chase ; and yet the rankest poacher on it, to supply himself with means of ceaseless drunkenness whereby to drown his conscience, when I would not live with him there, after he had sold the last shred of our inheritance but the few perches he could not wrench from me, to part withal—this hut and pool.’

‘Listen again, grandam ! The new order of sectaries who are now arising in the body politic, where they have been fermenting for a hundred years, and who, in my opinion, will achieve the mastery in this coming struggle, hold it for a law of religion and morality, which they propose shall supersede all others, that a promise of marriage interchanged between a man and a woman in the presence of witnesses, with such sequences as followed in my hapless mother’s case, do constitute a marriage ! And see you not—if in the meantime I can render myself of service and advantage to the cause of the Parliament and Presbytery—the moment they shall establish their discipline, and I produce my proofs, an adherent of the King’s, like my brother Edward, will find but little favour in their sight to bar the consequences !’

‘Great God, if it might be ! If I might not close these aged eyes until I had seen this great retribution on the name of Holte ; had seen my daughter’s and my father’s name redeemed from shame and infamy !’

exclaimed the old woman, with really frantic fervour, and clasping her hands, and looking upward in a species of ecstasy of revengeful passion and hope.

'Peace, peace, old fool !—What's that rustling in the thicket? You will bring some note upon us that will mar the whole plot,' said Richard, very angrily, not without more cause than he imagined; for Dorothy Firebrace had given an involuntary movement of horror and surprise at what she overheard, that made the unusual stirring in the bushes where she was concealed behind the hut.

'Leave me then awhile to think over this blessed imagination of yours, dear grandson, and devise how I may best aid in its fulfilment,' returned Maud, still evidently almost delirious with excitement. 'What a brain for contrivance hast thou, my Richard! But even as a mere lad thou didst counsel me how to withstand all Sir Thomas's chicanery of advocates and the law, to dispossess me of my little freehold. Go now, go now; let us not hazard anything in so wonderful a plotting, if we can but bring it to pass. When I am alone I will counsel with my imps, Suck-cow and Weasel. You shall see they will give me rare inkling into the matter.'

'Tut! I had best begone—she is at her dotage again!' muttered Richard Grimsowre, aloud and yet to himself. 'Farewell, then, grandam, for awhile; I shall need your advice and assistance, be sure, but not for some while again, until I see how matters are likely to turn in this coming time of strife and struggle. Here are a few pence for your needments; for indeed my father keeps me very bare, to supply his fine heir in playing the soldier in the King's service, whose triumph will be my ruin.'

Richard seemed then to dole out some scanty assistance, in the way of a few silver coins, to his aged relative, who eagerly extended her withered and palsy-shaking palm to receive them, and with a sigh as if he begrudged the dole, scanty as it was. Then replacing a purse well stocked with much weightier metal in the breast of his lawyer's robe, he wished his grandmother sullenly, 'Good even,' and infinitely to Dorothy's relief, took his departure.

CHAPTER XVI.

A ROUGH WOOER.

THE armourer's daughter remained for some moments couched in her hiding-place, without daring to breathe, until the termination of the interview took place.

Brave and fearless as she was by nature—as brave and fearless, perhaps, as a woman can be—the insidious treachery of the projects she had overheard appalled her even more than their audacity. She felt as the most courageous of men might, if conscious that, not himself, but another very dear to him, was in danger of being involved in the windings of a snake. Nor was the notion of personal peril altogether absent. Dorothy felt that, if detected in her involuntary espying, a man of so

resolute a character as Richard Grimsorwe might probably hesitate little at the means of ridding himself of apprehension on the score of a solitary and unprotected girl.

She continued carefully perdue in the bushes that sheltered her until some time after she imagined the ground clear. She saw Grimsorwe, in fact, stepping over the weir dam, and apparently taking a path into the wood on the opposite side of the pool; and, after a somewhat longer interval, she heard the old woman moving off, muttering and ejaculating to herself, in a direction fronting from her hut. Dorothy, however, judiciously waited still a considerable further interval, to give time for both of these ominous gossips to be fairly out of the way ere she emerged from her covert.

She had no doubt, from Grimsorwe's taking it, that her proper route to Aston Hall lay in the direction he had pursued. Thinking now that he must be out of risk of her overtaking him, she determined to follow in his traces; and accordingly proceeded to the weir dam, keeping herself as nigh the trees and as much out of eye-shot in any other line of observation as possible.

Arriving at the weir, Dorothy was, however, greatly annoyed at finding that the old woman was again within view. She had, indeed, proceeded some distance along the margin of the high black upper pool, and was engaged apparently in selecting and gathering herbs or cresses from amidst its rank close vegetation into an osier basket on her arm, muttering all the while to herself what might well have seemed to a superstitious ear spells and fiendish sanctifications to her work. And all Dorothy Firebrace's brightness of wit, and vivacious sense of the unreasonable and ridiculous, could not protect her from the influences of her age, and of the notions in which she had been reared, in this respect. Besides, had she not heard the wretched old woman herself confess that she had imps, whose counsels she placed great reliance on, and who doubtless aided her in her worst malefactions? Dorothy believed old Maud to be a witch in reality, and of the most cruel and malignant description, since her curses, Herod-like, slaughtered innocent babes in the cradles, and menaced possibly the life of a young man who, in so strangely brief a time, had become the great interest of the impassioned girl's existence.

Luckily the witch's back was turned in her operations; and, hoping to get over the water ere she looked round from her unhallowed work, Dorothy Firebrace shrinkingly ventured on.

There was more difficulty in effecting the passage of the weir dam, nevertheless, than she had anticipated from observing Richard Grimsorwe's rapid transit. He was probably accustomed to make it. But the planks were set widely apart, loose, rotten, and in places altogether swept away, Dorothy found, when she attempted the crossing. The bridge was, in truth, part of the property disputed of old between Maud Grimsorwe and Sir Thomas Holte, and might be considered in a species of local chancery. And, of course, as the hag took pleasure in injuring the effect of his improvements by the desolation and neglect in which she retained her own remnant of property, the bridge was left in disrepair. Fortunately there was no current, and though the descent of

the water from the upper pool was heavy and unintermitting, it was seldom of violence or sweep to dizzy the passenger. Dorothy, therefore, after a brief hesitation, believed she should manage the passage well enough; and, in fact, she had reached about the middle of the weir in safety, attending chiefly to her footsteps, when the sound of a dreadful cat-screaching, rather than mewing, came to her ears, and apparently startled the attention of the old woman also. Dorothy then—to her surprise no less than her consternation—heard a shrill scream in the direction of the herb-gathering witch.

All this greatly startled her, and steadying herself, with an awkward quiver, on a plank she had now reached, Dorothy paused, and glanced with no feigned alarm into the gloomy recesses of the upper pool. And there on the margin stood Maud Grimsorwe, gazing towards her, and frantically tossing her arms, while the grotesque and fiendish-looking skeleton cat wailed and mewed around her. This was enough for Dorothy, who hastened her pace at a reckless rate across the weir, panic-stricken with the notion that the hag was about to put some spell of hideous witchcraft upon her too.

It was not until she had fled at a really headlong pace a considerable distance along the lane she found on the other side, that Dorothy remembered having heard the old woman call to her such harmless words as, ‘Daughter, daughter! what do you there?’ But the misery and imploring in the tones suggested to her that perhaps, after all, Maud Grimsorwe was partially lunatic, and had mistaken her for an apparition of her deceased daughter. That unhappy victim of lust and betrayal, it appeared, had committed suicide near the spot—very likely from the weir dam. It was true the witch had alluded to her child as being fair-haired; but the shine of the evening sun on Dorothy’s dark locks, and the feebleness of aged eyes, might have diminished that means of disillusion.

This accident produced another untoward result. Dorothy’s more immediate alarm made her forget another danger, and her rapid pace brought her at a sudden turn in the wood upon a wayfarer whom she had the least desire imaginable to overtake. She came almost close upon Richard Grimsorwe, who, with his long robe tucked up, and held uneasily behind him on the pommel of his sword, presented a portentous and moodily thoughtful marching figure to her approach.

Dorothy’s progress was startlingly checked by this apparition. But she felt at once that retreat was out of the question—would only have roused suspicion, and probably pursuit. With very good nerve, therefore, she endeavoured to treat the junction as an accident of the road, that required no particular notice on either part. At first, indeed, she had some hope that, by dropping her own pace, she could let the lawyer resume his start in advance, and follow unobserved. But she had arrived too abruptly, and with too much echo of footfalls, for this manoeuvre. Richard glared round at once at the sound, and perceiving the new arrival, came to a sudden pause, and halted too.

‘Save you, my fair maiden! but what is the wonderful hurry with you on this road—and why do you stare at me so dismayed?’ inquired Grimsorwe, taking a surprised but clearly pleased and interested view of

the lovely and panting young fugitive, whose rich complexion was heightened to an extraordinary glow of colour and beauty by excitement and rapid movement. 'Tis not the road to Paradise that I wot of,' he continued, finding she was too much out of breath to reply at once, 'and though you look a very suitable wayfarer in that direction, I warn you, you will not come upon the angels with the fiery swords within a mile or two, to my certain knowledge.'

'I only want to go to Aston Hall, sir; I have lost my way—the bull drove me from it,' said Dorothy, shrinking with visible alarm and secret horror from the bold and licentious gaze now fixed upon her.

'You are right enough, then, for Aston Hall, fair maid, and as I am going that way too, we can bear each other company,' was Richard Grimsorwe's reply.

'Nay, sir, I am spent, and cannot keep your pace,' said Dorothy, endeavouring to drop without further parley into the rear, by slackening her rate of advance.

But Richard Grimsorwe immediately shortened his own step. 'Faith, then, sweet one, I will keep yours,' he said, 'for such companionship is not to be lighted on in every lonesome lane in this dismal Feldon countryside.'

Dorothy felt indignant, and also alarmed. But her own natural high spirit and policy alike suggested not to seem afraid, and, hoping they should soon arrive at some less deserted spot, she silently acquiesced in the arrangement, so far as neither to increase nor diminish her rate of progress. But she made no reply likely at all to encourage the free and easy style of accost Grimsorwe seemed to think it right to assume to an unprotected female on a solitary country pathway.

The lawyer himself was probably more struck by this silence than he would have been by any form of speech. Possibly it not only surprised, but embarrassed him. Dorothy felt that he kept glancing at her earnestly and scrutinisingly, as they proceeded almost abreast along the narrow road. At last he spoke again.

'You are going to Aston, you say, my blooming pearl of damsels errant. Can it be by some marvel of good fortune, which my Lady Holte has not deigned to allow a town visitor as yet to be aware of, you are of her ladyship's attendance there?'

'No, sir,' replied Dorothy; 'I am a Birmingham girl, and I have only an errand to Aston, which will not, I trust, take me many minutes to despatch.'

'I might have known that by your precisian garb, in truth,' said Grimsorwe, looking still more perplexed. 'I will guess again, then. You are some relative and visitor of Adam Blackjack, our master-cook, who I know has kinsmen among the pure ones in yonder town, and is suspected of being himself more than half a convert from the good jolly notions of his trade and place?'

'I am no cook's or other menial's kinswoman or visitor,' returned Dorothy, offendedly, adding haughtily, without considering all the effects of her declaration, 'I am Dorothy Firebrace, Armourer Firebrace's daughter, of Birmingham, who is known for a man of repute and substance in our town.'

'Ay, troth, is he ; I nothing gainsay the affirmation thereof,' replied Grimsorwe, with evidently increased curiosity. 'I have heard of the precious man, and for my own part hold him and his craft in high honour and esteem. But he and his are in no very sweet savour at Aston at present : which something makes me curious to know what may be your purport at the Hall.'

'My business is not with you, sir, whatever it may be, or whoever you may be : it is with Sir Thomas Holte himself alone !' returned Dorothy, not only greatly annoyed by the insulting tone of familiarity adopted by the stranger base-brother of Edward Holte, but aware that it was not to so bitter though secret a foe she ought to give any inkling of her object in visiting Aston.

'Ah, indeed, that's sharply said ; there is a keen edge to the bright metal, then?' resumed Richard Grimsorwe, staring with still more audacity of query and admiration of an unpleasing kind at the wondering beauty. 'But you must know, fair damsel, I am one that, if you have any suit worth the obtaining to Sir Thomas Holte, am the likeliest within any distance you can name of his hall steps, to make or mar your petition.'

'I need no help, nor ask any ; my suit with Sir Thomas Holte concerns his own weal and service, not mine own,' said Dorothy, pettishly.

'Then it is like to speed the better. What ! is it concerning this arming of the Aston tenantry, to ride behind my pretty brother Edward to the King's wars?' Richard Grimsorwe replied, apparently greatly struck by the latter statement. And he added in a tone purposely provocative and sneering, 'By St. Michael's breast-plate and helm, then, which, being fashioned at Birmingham, the devil himself could not crack into with his mace—I did not think the smiths of that town were of so forgiving a temper !'

'What say you, sir? There is no quarrel between my father and the worshipful baronet of Aston Hall,' replied Dorothy, whose curiosity was now in turn somewhat aroused.

'Is there none? Is there no clanship then, or fellow-feeling among tradesmen there, as among gentlefolks elsewhere?' said Grimsorwe, in whose mind a variety of reflections and conjectures had at last settled down into the true one.

Dorothy remembered the circumstance of Tubal Bromycham's abrupt dismissal from Aston, and his labours as an artisan in embellishing that stately residence. She had never heard the cause, or concerned herself much about it, concluding it was some difference of opinion in the works carried on there for Sir Thomas, under Tubal's superintendence, particularly as her father himself had ordered her to ask no questions on the subject, when once a vague impulse of curiosity had induced her to make some inquiry. She now therefore merely said : 'The smiths of Birmingham hold one another in very fair brotherhood and esteem, but they make no mortal quarrel of mayhap some slight misliking as to how work undertaken should be executed, and I never heard of any deeper grudge between Deritend and Aston than so.'

'Ha, well ; what happened was not likely to be boasted of either by

the master armourer or the skilful ironworker, who we hear is now to become his son-in-law,' said Grimsorwe, with a derisive laugh, and eyeing Dorothy with a still more penetrating and piercing gaze. 'But are you aware, damsel, what manner of work it was Tubal Bromycham thrust himself upon at Aston, and was so bitterly rebuked therein? I'll be sworn you would not guess it once in a thousand years; but, according to a true report I think I have heard, Master Vulcan set himself up for my Lady Venus—who but he?—and was in requital first solemnly tossed in a blanket by angry Jupiter for the presumption, and then squatted on his nether man a good long summer's day in Aston stocks, the gaze and laughter and pelting of a throng of miserable villagers, who thought to please their lord by out-aping his contumelious tyranny!'

Dorothy did not quite understand what was said, wrapped in the mist of such fine playgoing town expressions. But she understood enough to awaken her surprise and curiosity, and, perhaps, some other more vehement feeling than either, to a very lively impulse. 'What mean you, sir?' she exclaimed. 'Speak plainly, for you speak now of my betrothed husband; and, in truth, I never heard or suspected such a tale as this of him before.'

'Tis not the kind of story men tell to their betrotheds. Whose chimney is the good-man the last to suspect on fire?' returned Richard Grimsorwe, with his insidious and exasperating sneer, and seeming as if what he heard only confirmed a previous conclusion of his own. 'But it is all even as I say. An old granny, hereabouts, who reports to me all the news in my absences, told me that she herself saw Tubal Bromycham dragged out of the hall like a struggling ox, by well nigh all my father's men-servants setting their strength in a knot, ere they could have him to the place of disgraced punishment, where he sat gnashing his teeth between well nigh two sunsets ere he fell into a fit, and was released; not so much for pity as for dread that he might die on their hands. And the common report from there about Aston for months after was, that this absurd king-blacksmith of yours in Birmingham had shown himself so besotted in the conceit of his artisan skill and supremacy as to think to woo and win the haughtiest lady of Warwickshire, in the person of my fair half-sister (I must needs confess her so), Mistress Arabella Holte.'

Dorothy heard this astounding statement at first with a feeling of utter incredulity. But a short pause of astonished reflection suggested to her so many confirmations of this explanation of what had always been a vague though unconsidered puzzle and enigma to her, that she was struck with the belief finally that all was as she heard it reported.

Tubal Bromycham, she knew, had a right to consider himself by birth on more than an equality even with the 'haughtiest lady in Warwickshire.' And if Arabella Holte was so fair, what likelier than that a feeling deeper than admiration, and that overlooked all other inequalities, might have stirred the young blacksmith's robust and sturdy spirit even to so daring an assertion as a declaration of his passion? Sir Thomas Holte's towering pride and tyranny accounted amply for the alleged consequences in all other respects.

It cannot be denied that this conviction was bitterly mortifying to Dorothy Firebrace, who had so much reason to consider herself—famous beauty of her town as she was held—treated as a kind of fall-back, or *pis-aller*, in the affair. And yet, perhaps, she was not altogether displeased with the notion; for within those last few hours a feeling had arisen in Dorothy's heart, half whose pleasantest impulse was deadened by the notion of wrong to another. A generous, faith-overflowing, noble betrothed! But did Tubal Bromycham seem so now?

The result of a brief but decisive reflection on this strange intelligence—which passed through windings in her mind altogether without a clue for Richard Grimsorwe—clearly surprised him. Dorothy answered in an almost unconcerned tone, 'It was a strange madness, if so, in Tubal Bromycham; yet not so strange, since Mistress Arabella is, as you say, so fair! But Sir Thomas has made an enemy, who, I doubt me, will look some day for his revenge.'

'Do you precise, professing Christians of Birmingham hold revenge so sweet? And, if so, should it be altogether the portion of a too ambitious blacksmith?' Richard Grimsorwe said, after a pause of consideration, and in a cajoling, insinuating voice, from whose oily glide Dorothy instinctively shrunk, as from the soft undulations of a serpent in the grass. 'Do you owe your false betrothed no retaliation—deem you, I say, fairest Mistress Firebrace?'

'Retaliation! How mean you by the word, Master Grimsorwe?' she replied, for the first time calling him by the name, and with something of scorn and reproach in the sound. And she was startled, too, by the query; though for a very different reason than her questioner imagined.

'Tubal, your betrothed, made love to a lady of high estate—and if a gentleman of my degree made love to you, you should admit him a fair hearing. That is what I mean, fair townswoman,' he now replied.

There was a pause. Dorothy shrunk still more from the now gleaming gaze of her unwished companion. But with a scorn and disdain she could not repress she answered, after a moment's weighing of the expression, 'A gentleman of your degree!—I pray you, Master Grimsorwe, explain to me further, what is that? I have heard say your grandmother one way is a witch. Do you claim your gentility on the mother's side?'

A black frown and scowl passed over Richard Grimsorwe's brows. 'Ha, doth this Brummagem lane-haunter taunt me, too?' he muttered to himself. Then on a sudden, greatly to Dorothy's alarm, he stepped from his position walking beside her, right in the front, so as to stop her further way.

'How know you *that*? Where were you erewhile? The Aston bull was never in these woods—and methought I heard that same old grandam of whom you speak yelling with affright after me, soon after I had left her! Had you affair with her, my bonny wench, on your own account, and stopped to listen while she and I discoursed?'

The sudden questioning—the lonely situation in which she found herself with the menacing questioner—the truly terrible, the more than fiendish expression of Richard Grimsorwe's eyes, so many and contrary

passions glowed in them—so dismayed even the courageous armourer's daughter that she made no reply, but stood aghast and fear-stricken, looking at her fierce interrogator without venturing the least reply. The brutal Grimsorwe, on his part, seemed to accept this terror as a confirmation of his worst suspicions.

'So, my fine wench!' he exclaimed, 'you shall give me hostages of your goodwill towards me and mine ere you advance another step to Aston. Hear you! And I will accept none but—,' and before Dorothy could even anticipate, much less shun the cowardly assault, Grimsorwe had clutched the girl in his arms, and torn her to him with all his strength. Then stifling the screams she attempted to utter with his odious kisses, Dorothy found herself struggling frantically against much superior strength in the felon's arms.

Heaven knows what Grimsorwe's purposes might have been—whether merely to frighten a person whom he suspected of knowing too much from pursuing her journey to his father's presence, or some deadlier irreparable mischief. Whatever his first intent, however, his brutish excited passions might easily have urged him beyond it; irritated by the resistance and struggles, and yet more, the exceeding beauty of the victim, which his unhallowed violence more and more discovered to himself in the course of their close-clasped contest; when, on a sudden, by Heaven's mercy, a voice, whose thundering accents seemed to strike even Richard Grimsorwe motionless as by an actual bolt of fire, burst from some nigh though unseen post of observation. 'God's life, son Richard! what manner of law is this you administer in my domains?'

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR THOMAS HOLTE.

RICHARD GRIMSORWE, changing only his form of brutality, no sooner heard the voice than he flung his purposed victim from his unmanly embrace with such force and violence that Dorothy Firebrace was precipitated into a deep ditch on a side of the pathway. An action in the way of escaping detection, on the impulse of the moment, that showed of what the dastardly ravisher was capable, had he completed a crime that rendered necessary more elaborate contrivances for impunity. As it was, the armourer's daughter had great difficulty in saving herself from a severe fall, and consequent injury, by clutching at the bulrushes and nettles with which the ditch was choked, while the softness of the mud at the bottom broke the shock of her rudely propelled descent.

Exclamations from more than one voice, but with the first speaker's startlingly predominant, accompanied the whole movement; and if Dorothy had been in a condition to observe, she would have seen the figures of two men on horseback, who were enabled by that elevation to overlook the scene from above a line of park paling that skirted the ditch. One of these, exclaiming 'Fie! Master Richard, fie!' jumped from his horse, and with a singularly active scramble and bound, cleared

the inclosure into the ditch, evidently to render assistance to the ill-treated girl.

This kindly stranger was a young man, of the bright florid complexion generally communicated by an open-air life, and who, wearing a green livery, with a hunting-knife and horn at his girdle, seemed probably some official attached to the considerable sporting establishment at Aston Hall. He was, in fact, the chief falconer there, and took his name from his occupation. At least, he was known by no other than Robin Falconer; and exceedingly well liked throughout the countryside, as a cheery, honest, hearty lad of his calling under it.

There was little reason to doubt who was the other spectator. The exceeding pride and imperiousness of command of his attitude—the rich brocades of the doublet and cloak he wore—his clean-cut, swarthy, almost Spanish features, instinct with haughtiness and towering sense of supremacy—the beauty and fire of the steed he bestrode—the two muffled hawks on his wrist—all betokened the presence of the despotic and showy master of and builder of Aston Hall.

In other respects, Sir Thomas Holte's figure was clearly one of great strength of muscular development, particularly about the shoulders and arms, though the enormous stuffing and padding of all the parts of the male dress at that period, from the trunk hose upwards, seldom allowed the true proportions of the frame to be noted. His stature was certainly lofty, unless the upper portion of his person—all that could be discerned over the palings—was unusually long in comparison with the limbs. And this was in reality somewhat the case, as was visible when he was on foot. Sir Thomas Holte bore also a resemblance to both his sons, that would have recognised him to any one who knew either; but more particularly to the elder unlawfully-begotten one. The dark complexion and sharp-cut features were, however, the chief points. There was much that was domineering, fierce, and irascible in the worshipful knight and baronet's looks, but nothing of the stealthy and sinister ferocity that branded Richard Grimsorwe dangerous with nature's own searing-irons. *Cave quem Deus ipse notavit.*

A couple of instants sufficed for Robin Falconer to assist Dorothy out of the ditch, weeping bitterly; when the honest fellow, reiterating all kinds of assurances that no further damage should accrue to her, knelt on both knees, and set to work assiduously on the spot to clean her mudded shoes with some dock leaves, gathered for the purpose. Meanwhile Grimsorwe, perceiving clearly he was known, and that he had no chance of establishing an *alibi*, adopted the next best plan, and burst into a loud laugh. 'Faith, sir,' he said to Sir Thomas, in this way, 'the wench had sharper eyes than I, and must have espied you coming, for she had promised me a kiss for guiding her safely out of the way of jolly St. George, your great bull, which it seems hath broken bounds again. But observing you over the hedge, the minx grows shy, and claws at me as fine a resistance as ever Potiphar's wife in the Scripture tale.'

'Oh, thou false ruffian! But for your arrival, good gentlemen, the villain meant me the basest wrong, and I had scarcely 'scaped at a less forfeit than death; which yet I would a myriad times have preferred to

his brutish embrace!' half sobbed and half shrieked the armourer's daughter. 'In God's name, do not desert me now! He thrust his company on me all along, against my most earnest and expressed desire; and I fled from nothing so harmless in comparison as your savage bull, but from his detestable grandmother, the witch, with whom I espied him in a conspiracy of death and ruin against his noble brother, at the hut below. And this I will go and witness at once to Sir Thomas Holte, good yeoman, if you will protect me to your master's house and presence.'

'Sir Thomas Holte is here, overlooking, and hears all, fair maiden,' said the falconer, looking rather embarrassed, but indicating his master by a gesture towards the palings.

'Is here? Is where? I will let him know what a true bastard his base-born whelp is!' said Dorothy, righteously exasperated beyond studying her words, and who, besides, was reared in a plain-speaking age and among a plain-spoken community.

'Ay, there is nothing a woman will not say and do that would shift the blame of such a discovery partly from herself wholly to another,' said Grimsorwe, dexterously awakening a reminiscence in his father's mind which he knew would be of influence.

In truth, Sir Thomas frowned darkly. 'A woman's tongue is no scandal, certes, that openeth a baying against a man in some matters,' he said. 'Still, this is something of a rough wooing, Richard, even for you town gallants, who, we poor country folk are given to understand by your plays and discourses, carry fortresses by a brisk assault, which we should besiege by slow approach, and sap for a whole campaign, and then, belike, fail in. But who is this fair wench? Methinks I should recall something in her favour; though I cannot well remember at this onward of time whether I am mistaken or not in my supposal.'

'You are not, sir, if you take me to be the daughter of Zachariah Firebrace, master armourer of Birmingham, who of a former time often frequented your noble dwelling and appurtenances,' said Dorothy eagerly, though she had now her fears whether the statement presented any very strong claim on Sir Thomas Holte's consideration.

'It is even so,' replied the baronet. 'And of a surety, Dickon, you have started the greyhound for the hare this time! But what do you here, my good girl, so lonesomely in the fields with that tempting peachy face? Doth the worthy craftsman, your sire, doubt that my son hath my commission and assurance of payment for the artillery we need?'

'Nay, sir; but yet I have business worth the hearing with you, though I will not say it before a scowling night-bat, who hates his brother worse than Cain, for being, in the like manner as Abel, more acceptable to God and man, beyond reckoning!' returned Dorothy, somewhat recovering now, but continuing to survey Richard Grimsorwe with unspeakable indignation and loathing.

'This is another of those who are only straining their wits to find matter of invective against me to you, sir,' said Grimsorwe, with crafty bitterness. 'Belike some leman of my brother's, who, in truth, envies me the fatherly countenance you show me, for my mother's sake in spite of all.'

'It may be so, Richard ; but thou art not exactly the saint to call my son Edward a sinner—even so,' returned Sir Thomas, sharply. 'But lie on this unbrotherly captiousness and carping, and do not presume too much against thy better-born, though not elder, to make me run the equal favour and indulgence I have ever shown thee. Know thy place, such as it hath been appointed thee. or I must teach it thee in another manner, and perhaps recall to my mind more than will please thee, that thou art also the grandson of the most hateful hag that ever—' death ! she is here !'

This latter exclamation was occasioned by the sudden and totally, to all parties, unexpected appearance at this moment of the Witch of Aston, who, hobbling as if for life and death, and still attended, dog-like, by her frightful cat, suddenly turned into sight at an angle in the road, close on the scene of action. So eager was her speed, indeed, and so fixed her attention on some unseen ulterior object, that she pelted almost close upon Dorothy and Robin Falconer before she seemed to discern any obstacle on the road, while her cat appeared as if it skimmed along in her wake on the wind, with all its four legs rigidly set.

Apart from any superstitious feeling, Robin had reason to apprehend a personal concussion. But he was most alarmed, probably, from reasons of the former description, for he uttered an exclamation that expressed fear more than anything else, as he jumped out of the old woman's way. And, so rooted were old customs in the country part of England still, he actually crossed himself as he exclaimed, 'Forefend thee, witch ! what mean ye now ?'

'Ho, ho ! are you there—are you there ? It is not my daughter—it is not my daughter !' groaned the old woman, bringing herself as suddenly as she had arrived to a halt, but clearly without taking any notice of Robin Falconer's interposition, glaring fixedly with her frightful luminous eyes at Dorothy Firebrace.

The latter shrunk from her look. 'Keep the witch off me !' she exclaimed. 'She hath done me much harm already to-day by her wicked eyes, and will do me more.'

'She bodes harm to whoever and whatever comes within her purview. I had rather three magpies had crossed me in a field ; and there will never be good times at Aston until she has cracked with her old, dry marrowless bones in a bonfire !' muttered Sir Thomas, adding, in raised and exasperated accents, 'Hag ! what do you here ? Was it not stipulated between us that you should never again cross my path ?'

'I was your bondsman, grandam. Why break you my faith for me ?' said Richard Grimsorwe, in his turn, angrily enough. 'But what ail the old idiot ? She seems to stare with open eyes, and yet asleep, at the girl ! Do you know her, grandam ? Is she of your *herb acquaintance* ?'

Dorothy's glance flashed flakes of fire on the vile asperser, while the old woman, recovering herself, as it seemed, with a shock of consciousness, turned from her with a wild and horrible stare at her grandson. 'What ! gallows bird, you too belie a poor, wretched, miserable old woman, your mother's mother ?' she yelled. 'Say you too that *Mau*

Grimsorwe brews hell-broth, and hath dealings with the foul one? Tell Sir Thomas that; he needs but a half-pretext to bring me to the faggot and tar-barrel! But I thought it was her ghost—my daughter's ghost—and would have craved her pardon for all my mercilessness to her, that she was glad to seek refuge from my curses in the black pool, yonder down! But it is not Maud—my pretty, golden-haired Maud, whom it made the very gravedigger weep to deny christian burial to, and drive the stake into her fair breast! Who is it then? Be not afraid, fair girl; for my daughter's sake, I will not curse any young thing that resembles her ever again!

'Bid the hag aroint, Richard, or I shall lose all patience with her yet again!' said Sir Thomas, in passionate and yet strangely stifled and suppressed accents, as if he also felt some superstitious awe of the poor old wretch's imaginary powers.

'Grandmother, go. I am in trouble already with my father, and you will lead me into worse. I will come by-and-by, and learn your meaning in what you now say,' half ejaculated and half muttered Grimsorwe, drawing his sinister relative away from the scene of action, and setting her withered visage homeward to her hut. He added some yet more emphatic whispered words, which she seemed to understand; for her head began to shake with a kind of palsy, and ejaculating, 'Ay, ay, it was a bargain—it was a bargain! Mopkin, Mopkin! my cat, my cat! we are wanted at home! A good day to all the fair company, and a long night when it comes, for there are few of us who will rise very sweet and fresh-smelling from the grave! Make the most of your time, then on earth, Sir Thomas Holte, for it is short with the best of us; and He that is the Judge of judges is no respecter of persons, and asks not whether a sinner wore purple and fine linen or homespun on the earth. And so I leave my benison on the good company.'

The witch then—perhaps a little rudely accelerated by a push from her grandson—hobbled off the scene, attended by her imp, as it might well be considered, with as strange and unwonted rapidity as she had entered upon it. But, for a considerable distance, those who remained could hear her muttering and laughing in a low, self-satisfied chuckle to herself, as if well pleased with having left an impression of vague menace and disaster behind her.

And so she had—particularly with Sir Thomas Holte. 'I'll warrant me,' he said to Dorothy Firebrace, 'what thou hast to say to me is of some evil betiding and misfortune, since that detested beldam has made me an encounter! What is it? Be speedy, for I shall be interrupted shortly into night-fall, and I wished to air me, after my hawks' flight, before sunset, and they grow restless in the jesses enough to break their fine sharp claws.'

'Heed again how you listen to the spiteful she-creature, Sir Thomas; for I have gathered from her, now it reminds me, that she is the betrothed of yonder audacious blacksmith of Birmingham, Tubal Bromycham, who sets himself up as a wooer of your daughter, Arabella, and was fitly brought to his senses in your filthiest horsepond, which made me stand the less upon my manners with so free-spoken a coöster as madam,' said Grimsorwe. 'The villain's suspicions were reasonably enough

confirmed from what he had now heard—that Dorothy Firebrace had overheard something of his recent conversation with his grandmother, and, perhaps, proposed to avenge her own maltreatment by revealing the wicked suggestions and plots they had exchanged.

The trick failed not of its effects. Sir Thomas's frown deepened in his already crumpled brows. 'What! hath the wealthy armourer chosen a mere brawny slave like that for a son-in-law?' he exclaimed. 'But 'tis no great marvel that a blacksmith's foreman, who dared raise his eyes to the daughter of Sir Thomas Holte, should set himself to win his master's to wife.'

Dorothy had scarcely known what degree of credit to attach to Richard Grimsorwe's malicious statements and insinuations on this point. But now that they were so amply confirmed, she could no longer refuse belief to the tale. And although it did not pain her at all in comparison with what she might have felt if she had herself been greatly attached to her plighted husband; nay, perhaps, under the altered feelings of the last few hours, it rather pleased her to find she owed him so much less earnest fidelity than she had credited to him; still her pride as a woman, and an admired beauty, sustained a severe shock in the revelation. 'But I am not yet Tubal Bromycham's wife, mark you, sir,' she said, 'and, mayhap, with this new knowledge I have gained, never shall be! But, as I have said, my business with your worship is concerning no blacksmith or Tubal Bromycham in the world, but your honourable son and heir, Master Edward Holte, who has given me a letter of credence and information to you of the last importance, which I will deliver and explain as soon as I achieve your near and private ear!'

'A letter!—from my son—from Edward Holte?' exclaimed the baronet, now evidently greatly struck and surprised. 'Give it me over the palings then, and bear me company some furlong higher up the road, when we shall both come to an easy entrance across the moat, upon the garden terrace. Go before, Richard, and tell my Lady Holte and Arabella, whom you will find taking the air there, that I am on a speedier return to supper than I thought. Ho, Robin Falconer! hand me the paper, and take your birds on your own jesses.'

So saying, the impatient Lord of Aston spurred his horse close to the palings on his side of the demarcation, snatched rather than took the letter his servant forwarded, and tossed the hawks so suddenly from his wrist, that the poor sky-harriers, being blinded in their mufflers, fluttered wildly about until the falconer's well-known lure guided them to him by hearing. Still further surprised by the formal appearance and thickness of the letter, Sir Thomas hurriedly broke open the seal, and putting his horse in movement, began to read.

As for Richard Grimsorwe, it did not seem that even he dared to remain against his sire's injunction; but he moved off clearly with great slowness and reluctance. But at the first exclamation he overheard, and which Sir Thomas Holte could not suppress, he halted and looked eagerly back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ASTON HALL.

BEFORE this utterance was made, however, Dorothy, keeping pace with the active but gallant falconer (whose horse, by-the-bye, kept him equally implicit company on the park side of the palings), found herself in full view of the stately and beautiful edifice which was destined to testify so plainly to posterity the grandeur and wealth and princely tastes of its founder.

Such, to the present day, it remains, in spite of some cavilling of taste that may exist as to the effect of the singular Saracenic minareted roofs of the three towers, central and flanking, that form the principal reliefs of the otherwise purely English and domestic architecture of the picturesque and imposing mass. In spite, too, of the disproportionate smallness and lack of decorative carrying out in the design of the entrance door of the mansion on its principal front, over which Sir Thomas Holte had placed a proudly humble memorial of his achievement in the erection of the building, surmounted by a richly emblazoned coat of arms, of many quarterings, and concluding with an emphatic LAUS DEO (Praise be to God !)—an expression doubtless to be taken as a pious ascribing of all the glory and success in the great work to the supreme Planner and Executant of the universe, but might be read almost like an ejaculation of weariness and impatience at the slow conclusion of a labour that had occupied seventeen years of the life of a mortal man—for the inscription recorded that Aston Hall was commenced building in the year 1618, and concluded Anno Domini 1635.

The result, however, did not disgrace even so protracted a task-work ; especially at this period, when it was only in the second decade of its completed existence, and in all the glory and splendour of novel decoration.

The rich red brickwork was as yet untarnished by the beating storms of two hundred winters, and exhibited the white stone copings and figured reliefs of the façade and its still nobler wings, and the aërial balustrades on the summits of all the chief masses of the pile, with the brightness and lightness of a fringing of lace. The innumerable diamond-paned lattices seemed to make the walls as pervious to light as if they had merely been thrown up to support them, and the architect had most skilfully disguised the moderate height of his building by the loftiness, and elegance, and variety of the terminations in pointed gable, and twisted chimney, and arabesque pinnacle, into which he had carried his general roofs, independently of the elevated crowning effect of his three ogive-shaped minarets, of which the centre nobly balanced the whole pile to the eye. It is now a little out of the perpendicular, and so produces rather a contrary effect. Still, the whole suggests and increases the regret of the spectator, that so fine a monument of the palatial architecture of our ancestors—almost the only old remains Birmingham can boast—should run the risk of sinking into decay, or of being abandoned to worse destroying influences than those of time—

for want, not of means, but of the taste and will to preserve it to so wealthy and unadorned a town.

But it is not for a stranger, however much it may be permitted to a romancer, to interfere in this strictly domestic affair of municipal Birmingham. And it is perhaps an uncalled-for episode in another respect, since Dorothy Firebrace did not approach the mansion on the side principally alluded to, but on the Garden Front—worthy then of the name, and not altogether unworthy now—with its noble terrace walk, bordered by a marble balustrade, overlooking extensive grounds laid out in a rich variety of flower-beds, orchards, clipped yew hedges, flights of steps, statues, fountains, and other ornamental appendages of the style introduced in the reigns of Elizabeth and James by certain of our ‘travelled thanes’ from Italy.

It was easy to see that a man of ambitious and haughty aspirations must have contrived, or assented to, the creation of such a residence for himself and his descendants. The great wealth of Sir Thomas Holte itself would scarcely have justified his building so proud a residence for a family that meant to remain contented in the highest rank of the gentry merely—unless a baronet is to be counted as in the lowest degree of nobility. But, in truth, Sir Thomas Holte was well known to cherish the ambition of founding a race that should take degree with the highest in the land, and it was even said had for years nourished the design to give his grand mansion a suitable tenant in the person of a peer of the realm. It was this purpose that had peculiarly embittered to him the numerous deaths of the male children, born of his wedlock with a lady of noble descent. And this, besides the natural affection of a father, made Edward Holte’s existence and welfare a subject of perhaps scarcely less anxiety and importance to him than those of the sole heir to some imperial dynasty.

It may be imagined, therefore, with what emotions of alarm and exasperation a personage of passions so violent and unrestrained ascertained from the writing in his hand that this precious pledge was in the power of a seditious and excited mob. In the very clutches of two enemies, one of whom he knew he had mortally offended, and the other of whom he had every reason of alliance and friendship to perceive, now, was assured to share the sentiment.

His exclamation, as has been said, stopped Grimsorwe’s remoter advance, but also Dorothy’s, with Robin Falconer, just as they reached the narrow winding of water, rather than moat, between the precincts of the garden and Aston Park and Chace. In reality, such an explosion of fury as that into which the choleric King of Aston, as he was sometimes called, now burst, had never before been conceived, much less witnessed, by the young girl, accustomed to the decorous and muffled tone of a society, deeply imbued at that period with religious gravity and control of the inner emotions. It was a volley of terrific oaths at first, poured forth without stint or measure; and only after a protracted relief in the outburst, becoming at last a little articulate and intelligible. ‘Gad’s my life! Thunder and lightning and death! My son—my only son—Edward Holte, my son, in the hands of the scoundrel rabble of Birmingham!—in the hands of Tubal Bromycham and his canting

father-in-law ! He is lost, he is dead, he is slain, he is murdered ; and I have built my glorious house, and thrown twenty manors into a scale of battle and civil war, to become an heirless, miserable, despised old man !

‘How say you, sir !’ exclaimed Richard Grimsorwe, eagerly returning upon the word.

‘No, Sir Thomas Holte, you are much mistaken,’ said Dorothy Firebrace, who, with her conductor, now also stopped close beside the excited baronet. ‘The life of your son is as safe under the frank pledge of my father as I trust mine—a woman’s—is in yours. Much safer than were it in this man’s hand who calls himself Edward Holte’s brother. Your son is in no danger of aught but a brief detention, if, as this letter remonstrates, you do not provoke the townsmen by any violent attempt at rescue.’

‘God’s light ! how else shall I redeem my son ? Not a man that eats my bread, whether he be of the ablest body or blind and halt as an old beggar of the wars, but shall to arms, and follow me to Birmingham to the rescue !’

‘Then is your son indeed lost, and only then,’ said Dorothy. ‘I left him safely housed, and honourably entreated in all respects ; but the townsmen thronging to their arms, under conduct of an esteemed and chosen captain of the Parliament ; and, when Birmingham so wills it, we can turn out twelve hundred fighting men, who will not readily turn back in a fray.’

‘What is the matter, sir ? I heard your voice, but, as my duty is of late so misinterpreted, I knew not whether I might make bold to ask or no,’ said Grimsorwe.

‘Richard ! your brother, whom I sent for arms for my tenantry into Birmingham, is seized and made the prisoner of a bloodthirsty, riotous mob !’ exclaimed Sir Thomas Holte.

‘You say not so, sir !’ said Richard Grimsorwe ; and, alas ! with what a fratricidal brightening and sparkling up of the eyes !

‘She says so—this letter says so, Richard ; what shall be done ?’ And the fierce, overbearing, self-willed old man seemed for awhile to have lost all these qualities, and to gaze dependently and submissively on his craftier son for an oracle.

‘Let me see the letter, sir,’ said Grimsorwe, perceiving his advantage. Dorothy, dismayed and astonished, no longer entered her protest. There was, indeed, a general and, so to speak, subservient silence, as the lawyer read his brother’s calm, noble, and quietly-couraged epistle.

‘Who is this agent of the Parliament of whom my brother speaks as directing you of Birmingham ?’ said Grimsorwe, as soon as he had deliberately, though with knitted brows, perused the whole missive. He spoke to Dorothy, who, without looking at him, answered, with knitting nostrils, ‘His name is Oliver Cromwell.’

‘Oliver Cromwell ?’ Grimsorwe appeared for a moment plunged in his reminiscences of town experience. ‘Oliver Cromwell ! Be assured then, sir, that you have to deal with the worst on that side, with the sole exception of him who jerks all their wires down below ! I have heard of the man when I was in London. Of few and ill-set words, but

of the most determined and resolute action among them all, and is or some suspected to have the most of a soldier in him of those who understand the part that must be played by the leaders of men in these times. Sir, you speak of rescuing my brother ; but against such a man it is impossible, if he is seriously in earnest to stir the commons of Birmingham to a resistance. What force have we ? A few rusty old pikes and foolish serving-men, who will run the first push of point they feel against their jerkins.'

Dorothy was surprised—certainly not well content—to find the kindless brother of Edward Holte of the opinion he desired to enforce upon his sire.

'What would you have me do, then?' almost yelled Sir Thomas Holte. 'Sit down under this maltreatment, and stomach my wrongs as if they were my meat?'

'Nay, sir, but speak the rogues of the town fair, for my brother's sake, awhile you despatch messengers to the King at Nottingham for succour. Such a town as Birmingham—so central on all his Majesty's ways against his rebels—the very garner and wheatfield of Mars—will instantly claim rescue at his hands.'

'But the King himself is lying at Nottingham, with hardly men enough about him to ensure the safety of his own sacred person ! Know you not how he hath been compelled to send nigh all his horse into Worcestershire, under his royal nephew, to cover our movements there, and check the Parliament's advance on the west?—Out on me, and shame on my rash tongue !' Sir Thomas Holte interrupted himself to exclaim : 'I was to keep this a secret, almost from my own bosom, until the Prince burst upon them, when they sent me the rendezvous of my son—and now here is even a woman in it !'

'But one whose secrecy there are means to secure, sir,' replied Grim sorwe, significantly, 'and his Highness Prince Rupert is but the nearer for aid to us in Worcestershire. Take my counsel, sir—which I could give at more freedom were we alone—and let us prophesy smooth things unto these angry blacksmiths of Birmingham, while we send at all the speed of man and horse into Worcestershire. Let me have the charge into Birmingham. You know I have a lawyer's tongue now in my head, or you have been at charges to little purpose for my education in London.'

Dorothy Firebrace, who heard all that was said, was struck with consternation at this overture. She remembered all that Edward Holte had observed on his brother's double-mindedness and villany, so amply confirmed by her own experience. She spoke up, therefore, with vehement warmth to Sir Thomas. 'Trust him not in his brother's case, worshipful sir !' she exclaimed ; 'he hates his lawful brother, and would place himself in his seat. I overheard him muttering as much with the foul witch, his grandmother, and debating the means how, if you will give me leave to declare them !'

'I trust I shall show differently in the proof ; 'tis a most malicious lie, invented by a wench who possibly is my brother's leman, to sow divisions between us—which was ever such creatures' common trick in families. But your worship knows what stress to put upon a woman's

raving tongue, when she hath malice in her heart, to set the clappers a-run.

Sir Thomas frowned, as at some unpleasant recollection. 'You shall go to Birmingham in your brother's behalf, Richard,' he said; 'I could never abide three words ere I should tell them all my mind on their brutish breach of manners and hospitality. And I must say it shows most brotherly in you to propose it; for shall not your own person be also in manifest jeopardy?'

'Not, sir, if you keep the master armourer's daughter here as a hostage for my safe return!' returned Grimsorwe.

Sir Thomas burst into a hoarse laugh. 'Why so, in sooth, it shall be!' he exclaimed. 'Nay, I thought not of it before, but can we not bargain Edward's release against hers? A fair swap!'

'Sir! your son's safe-conduct for me is in your hands. I am here unknown to my father and the whole town, who would be angry with me nigh unto stoning if they knew I took part against their purposes. Therefore, in Heaven's name, keep true touch with me, and since my errand is done, let me depart in peace.'

'It seems reasonable what she says—Edward's safe-conduct and assurance should be respected,' said Sir Thomas, hesitatingly eying Grimsorwe. 'And it were an ill-return for so generous a preference—'

'Sir, if you allow of her departure, not only is my brother Edward's danger from your retaliatory and offended enemies most manifest and inevitable, but the King's counsels and nakedness at Nottingham are all betrayed—to what advantages we know not, when there are men like Master Cromwell of Huntingdon to seize them!' replied the crafty lawyer.

'Nay, that will never do; she must remain our prisoner,' said Sir Thomas, 'but in an easy and well-purveyed captivity. Robin, take her to the great kitchen, and be her guard over her while Adam Black-jack places the best in his pantry before her.'

A captive, and in the kitchen, with menials for guardsmen and companions! The degradation, almost as much as the peril of her detention, nigh maddened Dorothy Firebrace.

It happened, too, that during a considerable portion of the dialogue Dorothy's glance had repeatedly fallen upon a group of persons parading up and down the terrace before the house, as if for evening exercise. Two of these were ladies; both apparently of rank by the rich gleaming of their dresses in the sunset splendours that now flooded the mansion and grounds in this direction. One of them, by the stiffer magnificence of her apparel—her train being carried by a page, and herself leaning on the arm of a pale elderly man, in the garb of a chaplain—was clearly the elder of the two. The other was of more playful and youthful manners, amusing herself with flinging biscuits to four or five peacocks, that trailed after her with their long gorgeous tails along the balustrade of the terrace, and in chit-chat with a motley-garbed lackadaisical looking fellow, who was doubtless the still common retainer in great houses, styled, without roundabout, a Fool.

And now, seeing these persons, Dorothy had for some time concluded in her own mind that they must be the mother and sister of Edward

Holte. And conceiving the possibility of women entertaining some compassion for a woman, she took a sudden resolution, and darting past Robin Falconer, over a narrow rustic bridge, she crossed the moat, and sped like an antelope up several flights of steps to the terrace where she observed the ladies. Arriving breathlessly before my Lady Holte, just as she was about to turn again on her parade walk—followed, at almost as desperate speed, but retarded by his lawyer's robe, by Richard Grim-sorwe.

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY AND MISS HOLTE.

THE wife of Sir Thomas Holte was daughter and co-heiress of one of the most distinguished county families of Warwickshire, and in her youth had been a lady of remarkable beauty, and, it was said, of great spirit and haughtiness. But all these advantages had not enabled her to bear up against the tyrannous supremacy of her husband's character; and at the time we are now upon she had sunk for many years into a meek and utterly dependent vassalage on his will and pleasure, in whatever sort declared.

Part of this will and pleasure certainly was that my Lady Holte should figure in magnificent array at the head of his household, and be served with all the state and ceremony of a princess. But of the truest and real privileges of a wife and mother, Lady Holte was as effectually deprived as if she had no claim to either distinction. She was allowed no voice or opinion in the education and disposal of her children in life. But, indeed, only two had ever so long preserved the gift of life bestowed upon them as to allow much scope for maternal anxieties or supervision. And the frequent calamities of her children's loss, due, probably, to the exhaustion of her own strength, consequent on unusual fecundity, had, doubtless, greatly contributed to the weakening and subduing of the poor lady's character. Particularly as superstition lent its dispiriting aid to sorrow, and the discovery of her husband's immoralities and cruelty to another woman, though before their marriage, which had provoked, she deemed, the vengeance of a sorceress on her progeny, darkened existence for her in the midst of all the state and splendour accumulated by that husband's pride around her.

Her son Edward was, in fact, Lady Holte's chief, if not her only, consolation. He alone inherited her fair complexion—her resigned and feeling temperament—her tenderness of heart—her high sense of honour and propriety. Arabella Holte greatly more resembled her father both in look and character. It is true that she claimed so much of her mother's almost perfect, angelic beauty as was compatible with a deep brunette complexion, raven-black hair, and eyes of the most extraordinary darkness and vivacity. But in the passion and power of her spirit, her pride, her ambition, her love of rule and despotism, she was her father's child every inch. To be sure all these characteristics had taken feminine forms in a woman, and Arabella Holte's strivings after domi-

nion took not unfrequently the shapes of the most bewitching coquetry and allurements, or languor of submission, rather than of sway. But these were only spells of the sorceress, destined to be wrought into cruel fixed enchantments, that left the victims the more powerless and yet scorned in her hands. For, young as she was, Arabella Holte had hitherto seemed impervious herself to the passions she took a wicked delight in kindling and deriding in others. The whole country rang with tales of her pride and disdainful insolence to her wooers—the number of suits she had seemed to encourage for awhile, but had concluded by scornfully rejecting—even on the part of persons confessedly her equals, or even superiors, in rank and fortune. And in these caprices she was so thoroughly backed and encouraged by her father that it was derisively reported Sir Thomas Holte meant to marry his children to Infants and Infantas of Spain—an opinion of the towering pride and arrogance of that nation, especially in family concerns, being a rooted portion of the public belief in England at that period. But of all his family, not even excepting his crafty and intriguing bastard son—Arabella Holte enjoyed the greatest influence with her despotic and head-strong sire. He had a respect for her abilities, which were certainly great, and her ambitious and haughty character too closely resembled his own not to merit his approbation. And what father could fail to be proud of beauty so rare as to be almost matchless in its singular union of brilliancy and attractions of the softest and most voluptuous order?—when it so pleased her that at times betrayed depth of real fire in her unopened soul, whence all that flimsy flame and evanescent glow must needs proceed? It was not a philosophical age, and Sir Thomas Holte was not the kind of reasoner to understand the dangers as well as the charm and power of such a temperament.

These were the goddesses to whom Dorothy Firebrace had now recourse in the untoward conjunction of her affairs. But little to her advantage, for although she succeeded in arresting the attention of both ladies, she had hardly commenced her incoherent demand on Lady Holte for protection, in her son Edward's name, ere Richard Grimsorwe arriving, terrified the unfortunate mother almost to death with the tidings of the young heir's seizure in Birmingham, coupled with the assurance that to retain the armourer's daughter was the only possible guarantee for his safety. Lady Holte nearly fainted away on the intelligence, and though her first exclamation of 'The witch, the witch!—the witch's curse has overtaken him too, now!' could not have been very agreeable to Grimsorwe, he reiterated his statement in a manner to overpower all poor Dorothy Firebrace's remonstrances.

It was true that Miss Holte, who had as little liking or trust in Richard as her brother, was at first inclined to take part against what he laid down as proper to be done in the case. But when Richard malignantly observed to her, 'Deem you that any lesser pledge than Tubal Bromycham's betrothed will save your brother, Mistress Arabella, from Tubal Bromycham's vengeance?' she bit her proud pouting lip, and was silent. And yet she was, doubtless, as incredulous as Dorothy or Edward Holte of good meaning towards him on his unlawful brother's part.

Dorothy even thought that the young lady, hearing her named as Tubal's betrothed, looked at her with something of disdainful and angry scrutiny. As if with all her own contempt for her blacksmith pretendant, her pride suffered not even the shadow of rivalry in another there. Perhaps the high-bred, passion-pale beauty was struck for a moment with some yet more annoying diffidence when she remarked the exaltation produced by excitement in what she would otherwise have despised as plebeian and vulgar loveliness, in the glow and flush of the Birmingham girl's appearance. But Sir Thomas Holte's arrival, who now came up on foot in a state of high exasperation, furiously rating poor Robin Falconer at every step for allowing the evasion of his captive, was decisive on the whole question.

In vain did Dorothy renew her entreaties, and declare the ruin that awaited her for the mere performance of a kind action, in case she was detained, and her absence discovered in the town.

In vain did even the meek and melancholy looking chaplain, who continued to support Lady Holte's trembling frame, entreat Sir Thomas to more mildness and forbearance. The old man was inexorable. 'I will take charge of her myself henceforth,' he said, 'and lock her for safety as high the sky as we can get in this house—in the Dome-Chamber up there, yonder! Have thou no fear, Richard, but go at once on thy honey-talk in Birmingham, while I send the fleetest horse in my stable on a bloody spur to Prince Rupert, in the west, for aid. Come with me, girl! or must I have some lackey's fingers clawing about you to enforce my will?'

'Go with my father quietly, maiden, since it must be; my brother's life were else in grievous peril,' said Arabella, whitening perhaps at some secret recollection of her own.

'My son, my only son! Sir Thomas, save my Edward, cost what it will!' ejaculated Lady Holte.

'I am my father's only child, madam; but if you really think that young Master Holte's life can by my captivity be assured from some certain danger—I mean, sir, since I cannot resist, I yield myself implicitly your captive,' said Dorothy, upon these words.

'It is well, girl; you shall not fare the worse for it; and I will myself be your interceder with Master Firebrace, at a fitting time. What! the old man and I have always been good friends before that foolish feud began. Come on; perhaps yours may but prove some few short hours' detention, for I will return you with every respect in exchange for my son the moment Richard brings me word he has negotiated the bargain.'

The baronet then, with unwonted courtesy to an inferior, as doubtless he deemed Dorothy, offered her his arm, which she was forced to accept, and to keep pace with his sturdy tramp, that made the watch-dogs tremble and creep into their kennels as he passed, until they entered Aston Hall.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DOME-CHAMBER.

SIR THOMAS and his grieving captive were now literally in the Great Hall of the mansion—a remarkably handsome and stately apartment, brilliantly lighted, ornamented with a ceiling in geometrical compartments, and an extraordinarily fine cornice, with mouldings of various curious and even fabulous animals, such as the elephant, unicorn, lion, griffin, stag, &c. The wainscot was at this period of finely polished oak, and ornamented over the panellings with numerous antlered heads of deer, preserved as trophies for their surprising size and extension in the branching. Beneath these were suspended several suits of richly wrought, but ancient armour; and over the immense fireplace, which was filled with holly, still ruby-specked with the previous winter's berries, was arranged a great circular ornament of pikes, around an heraldic shield, blazing with all the quarterings of the Holte family.

Sir Thomas glanced towards this decoration at once, and even drew Dorothy herself towards it. 'We have arms now had we men to wield them,' he said, 'and whatever Dick says, I will summon my tenants, and the knave-yeoman who holds back need never show on again at a Manor Court of mine!' The young girl herself, meanwhile, half unconsciously perused some lines conspicuously flourished and scrolled over the chimney-piece, intended, doubtless, for the edification of the menials whose place it was to dance attendance in this chamber.

If service be thy means to thrive,
Thou must therein remain
Both silent, faithful, just, and true,
Content to take some pain.

If love of virtue may allure,
Or hope of worldly gain,
If fear of God may thee procure,
To serve do not disdain.

Sir Thomas seemed then struck by some other thought, and turned proudly and eagerly to ascertain what effect all this state and grandeur produced upon the daughter of the master armourer of Birmingham. Greatly to the increase of his displeasure, however, he discerned that she was hardly taking any notice of what she saw. He could not himself but remark, though, how wan and colourless she had become on the relapse from her previous excitement, and he was, perhaps, a little touched at it. 'Cheer up, maiden,' he said: 'your detention, I trust, will not be for long; and meanwhile, it is not my purpose to put you, at all events, on prisoner's diet. I mean but to lodge you for safe custody in a high chamber above here, whence it will be impossible for you to evade; but come first to Adam Blackjack's offices, where methinks I shall have interest to procure you a crust and a sop to stay hunger, which is one of the worst calamities to a young stomach.'

Dorothy in vain protested she needed no refreshment—could partake of none. Despotic and obstinate in all his opinions and resolutions, the

baronet inexorably led the way to a door in a corner of the hall, admitting into a long and well-lighted corridor, speedily terminating in a flight of broad low steps. These descended rapidly into a high vaulted chamber, paved with red tiles, and set round with dressers bright with a prodigious array of polished pewter plates, with two long oak tables furnished with benches, evidently for the use of the Aston domestics at meals. Passing through this, a handsome brick archway admitted into a most extensive kitchen, fitted up with all the machinery for cooking on a grand scale, coppers, chopping-blocks, baking-kilns and ovens, and, above all, a fireplace of so extensive a range that it occupied one entire end of the chamber, and, indeed, rather resembled a black cavern separated from it by rows of iron bars.

At present only a small portion of this great culinary facility was in actual use. This was separated off by an iron plate, with sufficient fuel to heat an oven, which, to judge from a savoury scent diffused all over the kitchen, contained some relishing viand in process of baking.

Before the fire there sat a man whose appearance rather struck Dorothy Firebrace with a vaguely and yet strongly impressed feeling of mistrust and apprehension. He had a long, high, narrow head, set with closely cropped, nearly bolt upright, bristly black hair. His countenance was marked with an expression of profound gloom, and was by no means of a prepossessing character in other respects. But it was chiefly in the eyes, which had a peculiarly oblique and sinister glare in them when raised, that the unpleasant effect was to be remarked.

When the master of Aston Hall and his captive entered the apartment, this person was seated, apparently lost in a sombre reverie, staring fixedly into the steady glow of the baking fire before him, and with his arms crossed moodily on his breast. Beside him there was a small, round, perfectly white deal table, on which was a squat, black, silver-hinged book, much dog-leaved and time-stained, he had seemingly been engaged in perusing. His garb was the usual one of a cook in a great family—of snow-white flannel, with a chamois-leather apron, a girdle hung with a knife and steel, like a modern butcher's, and a scarlet cap, and stockings up to his wide, baggy knee-breeches. He was not by any means a young man—probably about the age of his master; but Sir Thomas's finer dark locks were threaded with a silvering of grey, while Adam Blackjack's beard and hair boasted all their primitive coarse dye.

Strange to say, the cook continued so lost in contemplation, that even the unusual apparition of his lord, and so accompanied, seemed not to excite his attention. To be sure, the invaders approached from behind, and the smooth-tiled floor gave little echo to footsteps. Nor was a personage to whom so much deference was due likely in the place at such an hour, if at all. Nevertheless, Sir Thomas both felt annoyed and exhibited himself so, to find his presence produce so slight an effect. 'The fellow hath grown into a trick of late to fall asleep thus awake,' he muttered. 'He had best not neglect the duties of his service, albeit, or all his antiquity in my house shall not hinder me from snatching his ladle-spoon from his hand! What reads he here that hath such an efficacy for slumber?'

So saying, he raised the squat black book and examined it. '*The Bible*!' he then said, with a slightly surprised and scornful accent. 'What doth a master-cook setting his brains a-simmer with divinity matters? 'S'life, I trust the knave is not bitten with the madness of the times, and turning text-monger at Aston Hall! "Many are called, but few are chosen," quotha! Is he caught by his long ears in the thorny mare of Jack Calvin's doctrines of reprobation and grace, which, as I hear, are all the prate of late times in the sectarian pulpits? If so, I would hope Master Blackjack's name was writ beyond rubbing out originally in the book of life; for, to my knowledge, he hath made many a backslide and stumbling on his way to Paradise. Yet is he a namesake of the first lord thereof. Wake, Adam, man, wake!—what doltish owl-staring is this?'

The cook started awake at these words, if he might be considered asleep, particularly as they were seconded by a vigorous slap on the shoulder. But his first utterance, as he glared round, betokened some continued disorder of the perceptive faculties. 'What, Sir Thomas, my master, and Mistress Maud come back again!'

'Idiot! what babble you? Are a score and ten years so easily jumped out of mind?' said Sir Thomas, angrily.

'I was thinking, sir—thinking of the old time over again; and the devil with his forked tail was a-whispering in my ear that—crave pardon, worshipful sir; but having nothing else to do but heed the bubbling of the game-pastry in the oven for your honourable supper——'

'It matters not; only keep awake now while you are so. Is my meat nigh in readiness?' Sir Thomas said, crossly interrupting the moody meditationist's exposition. Adam Blackjack had by this time completely recovered his faculties, and flung open the oven door, revealing a noble standing pie in full steam and browning in its recesses. 'It lacks scarcely another bubble,' he responded.

'Then serve it at once to this young girl, with some observance of white diaper and the like, and let one of the sewers produce us both a foaming tankard of the best October. I will be companion to her in that,' said Sir Thomas, while the cook surveyed the armourer's daughter with marked wonderment and curiosity in the erection of his black straight eyebrows. 'So soon, so soon!' Dorothy then heard him mutter to himself, though Sir Thomas did not. 'Am I called upon now, and thus, to take up my testimony in Israel, and go forth of the house of Ahab, and prophesy with the pure ones of Birmingham, even as Balaam's ass had its mouth opened with the spirit of wisdom and knowledge? Of a verity, if the old man takes up again with the sins of his youth, and would plunge me deeper yet with him in the furnace of damnation, whereto of a former time he opened me the door.' He muttered these latter words in a fierce though indistinct undertone; and then, with a glare of the eyes that made Dorothy start, he inquired of her, 'Who and what art thou, woman so fair and young, and what do you here with my worshipful master alone—to be surfeited and feasted with his meats and strong drinks?'

Sir Thomas burst into a huge, hoarse laugh. 'What, Adam, art thou, too, turned saint in thy elder time, and yet creditest me with so

much of the remains of my youthful spirits and jollity? No, man; this is no lovely leman tumbled from heaven into Aston Hall to tempt three-score years to folly; but a young maiden of Birmingham, who brings me such ill news thence that I am compelled, greatly against my will, to keep her in pawn, even for my son Edward's life!

Dorothy Firebrace had meanwhile been considering that she had frequently seen this moody and mad-eyed servitor in Birmingham, in attendance at the religious exercises of a certain new body of sectaries, who had been for some time growing there in number, and who were called Anabaptists. She knew little or nothing of their tenets, the upper classes of the town taking no part in them, having chiefly seceded to the Presbyterian and Independent forms of worship and doctrines. But it vaguely occurred to her that every kind of dissent implied some degree of friendly feeling among those who adopted a line of opposition to the established authorities, and she proceeded at once to lay her case, in a much clearer form than Sir Thomas Holte's statement, before the master-cook—greatly, as it seemed, to the discontent and anger of the former, whose pride, reasonably enough, revolted at the appeal from himself to his menial; more especially as the latter, apparently regardless of his master's visible indignation, continued to lend a dark and frowning attention to all she said. The choleric baronet speedily lost patience, and, angrily seizing Dorothy by her arm, he exclaimed, 'Jade! would you set my very menial up in revolt against me? Come where I may see thee and thy witching tongue safely caged in stone walls!' And he literally drew her after him by force up another flight of steps to the one they had descended by, and that emerged by a door contrived to communicate with the grand feasting-chambers of the house, by way of the principal staircase.

This, not yet disfigured by the atrocious coating of coloured pigments which the tastelessness of a subsequent century was to daub over the glorious massively-carved oak balustrades, was now before the unwilling captive and her captor. And up this the baronet dragged rather than led her, with real cruelty and violence in his irritated spirit of domination, alternately muttering threats of vengeance on his insolent servant, and ordering Dorothy, in startlingly fierce and Bluebeard-like accents, to follow on. 'What is it Richard means by forcing me still to entertain these mutinous slaves about me?' he said also, repeatedly. 'Though this be a good man of his craft, but for his entreaty I had dismissed the rascal the moment I heard he had taken to frequenting the Birmingham conventicles! He a spy, indeed, to tell us the counsels of the enemy! He is one to carry ours to them!'

Luckily the stairs, though arranged in numerous flights, were by a low step, and frequently reached good square landing-places in the ascent, so that the armourer's daughter suffered less than might have been expected from her rude handling.

In this manner they reached the top landing-place of the whole structure, where there was a strong high wicket-gate, securely padlocked. Sir Thomas had the key and unlocked it, ordering Dorothy Firebrace, more like a lamb driven into the slaughter-house than anything else, within. She then perceived another short, narrow, and very steep

flight of steps to the right, before her, terminating apparently in darkness, like the ladder of a belfry. But up this also Sir Thomas Holte sternly commanded her to follow. Dorothy felt it was in vain to exhibit the extreme reluctance and misgiving she felt, and was rejoiced to find that they stopped short of a peculiarly black and dungeon-like looking chamber on the very top of the stairs. And it certainly was a much preferable one into which Sir Thomas stepped, and, in somewhat less savage accents, invited Dorothy Firebrace to follow.

This chamber was of a singular round configuration, dome-shaped in the roof, and of a wider diameter than would have been concluded by surveying its exterior from the ground-plan of Aston Hall. For it was in reality the hollow of the minaret-shaped principal tower of the mansion. It was quite unfurnished, with the exception of some old broken fragments, seemingly deposited there as rubbish out of the way; and there was nothing but an interweaving of massive timber supports between the eye and the lead of the roofing. And like the reverse of tapestry, though very fine with gilding and arabesque tracings—the skilful work of Tubal Bromycham—on the exterior, this looked very black and dull within. There was no deficiency of light, however, from several good-sized bull's-eye windows set at the points of the compass in the dome, and Dorothy had every opportunity to appreciate the cruel security of the imprisonment to which she was to be consigned.

‘And now,’ said Sir Thomas, with a derisive and angry smile, ‘if you can fly like a bird from above the tallest chimneys of Aston Hall, or force a lock whose key is of the purest steel, and of a pound weight, you are free to leave this place, and return to your father, the armourer, ere he sends me back my son, Edward Holte, whom he hath so unlawfully, and unjustly, and masterfully made his prisoner. *What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!*’ And with this homely expression of his sentiments the haughty jailer left the Dome-Chamber, locking it after him with three successive movements of a prodigious iron-bolt, and leaving Dorothy Firebrace to meditations, the extremely unpleasant nature of which it is unnecessary to declare.

CHAPTER XXI.

BIRMINGHAM IN ARMS.

RICHARD GRIMSORWE took good care not to start on his mission to Birmingham until he was satisfied that the hostage of his personal safety was securely lodged—not to mention the strong motives he had to disrelish the prospect of Dorothy's being at liberty and complaining of his misconduct towards her in a town where she had so many and so powerful friends.

With respect to his brother's relations with the armourer's daughter, Grimsorwe knew not what conclusion to form; but the suspicions immediately raised in his own debauched and dishonest fancy, that they must be of a close and dishonourable nature, added to the other numerous motives of his animosity against the better-born though younger heir of

Aston a feeling of intensely jealous envy and rivalry at this new instance of his more fortunate hap. And as he had also little doubt that Dorothy had overheard his plottings with his grandmother, incentives in the conviction that his unbrotherly projects were likely to be revealed were joined, to stimulate him on his present course of action.

Little did Sir Thomas Holte dream of his chosen agent's real intents and purposes, when he proceeded to give him his instructions.

These were to proceed to Birmingham, seek an interview with the master armourer and his allies and abettors, and, in the King's name, make a demand for his brother's immediate and safe return to Aston, as the only condition of the restoration of Dorothy Firebrace to her friends, and avoiding a speedy application of armed force to the rescue of a prisoner so unlawfully seized upon and detained. But, meanwhile, the baronet declared that he would send an express, at the utmost speed of horse and man, into Worcestershire, to Prince Rupert, to ask for military aid against the sudden outbreak of sedition in Birmingham. Robin Falconer knew every inch of the country, he remarked, and was so familiar with all its details, that he would easily be enabled to give the go-by to any flying parties of the enemy's cavalry which might have been thrown out by the Parliament army in the west, under Sir William Waller.

Grimsorwe ascertained thus, to his great comfort, that Dorothy had not been enabled to secure any more trustful hearing to what she could reveal of his designs against his brother than when he was at hand to contradict her. But in truth he had established a very powerful influence over his father's mind; no less by Sir Thomas's conviction of his possessing the qualities of coolness and persuasion he was himself most deficient in, than by mean adulation and subserviency to the impetuous old man's humours and violence.

He had little occasion, certainly, to urge upon the baronet the extreme necessity of keeping the armourer's daughter in custody until both his sons were restored to him in safety. But he obtained a promise from his father, on learning where she was consigned, that he would not part with the key of the Dome-Chamber on any pretence, or for a single instant, to any person, unless under his own close supervision. This important stipulation made, Richard Grimsorwe got into one of his father's coaches, which he preferred to horseback, as a more peaceful and yet imposing announcement of his authorised position and business, and set off for Birmingham.

The events that had taken place had consumed the time until it was close upon darkness and the end of the long August day, that had commenced so ominously in Birmingham with the arrival of the fanatic fugitive from Nottingham, when Grimsorwe reached the town.

No scientific magician had as yet dreamed of gas, and the frugal manners of the time, and early habits of our ancestors, made even a few oil-lamps be looked upon as a wasteful superfluity in all but capital cities. Usually, therefore, Birmingham shared the light and darkness of the heavens above it only. Neither was any regular system of police introduced even in capital towns, and not a solitary watchman guarded the peace and security of Birmingham by nights. So that Grimsorwe per-

ceived at once that a remarkable change had come over the spirit of the town when at the entrance from Aston, where the highway traversed a field called 'The Butts,' from its being the place where the townsmen of old kept up their *cross-bow practice*, he found a great fire kindled in the very midst of the road, and heard his advance challenged in loud and sentinel-like accents by two men, furnished with musketoons (short hand-guns of a wide bore) to enforce their orders to halt.

'Under protest, as not knowing what right these, or any men, can have to hinder a subject of the King, on the King's highway, on his lawful business—draw rein, coachman!' said the Aston ambassador, looking from his roomy and grandly-bedizened vehicle with much satisfaction at the signs of resistance evident in the determined aspect of the two stout fellows who now advanced to parley.

'The King hath no longer a highway into Birmingham, while he continues in breach of the laws and customs of the realm of England. We of the town have declared for the Parliament: leawise, our masters and seniors have, whom we are bound in all true service to obey,' one of the men—seemingly, by his appearance, a smith—made haste to reply.

'Be it so; but they are your own necks you are putting into nooses, my good fellows. And what is all this pother about the young gentleman, worshipful Sir Thomas Holte's worshipful heir, and my honourable brother, whom you have made your prisoner, we learn at Aston?' said Richard Grimsorwe.

'You call your mother an ill name every time you so claim Master Holte, master lawyer,' replied the other sentinel, jeeringly, who doubtless recognised the speaker, and had no particular respect for him. 'But it is as true as if a lawyer had *not* said it, that the town abides by what the master armourer has done, and is sworn in on the great Guild-hall Bible to stand by him unto every consequence.'

Richard Grimsorwe's dark visage flushed at the gibe, and the rancour in his heart deepened against its original innocent object. To the present interlocutor he answered in smooth and unstirred accents: 'I wish, then, to speak with whoever among you usurps the principal sway and authority in Birmingham, for I have a most important message from Sir Thomas Holte to deliver, on his son's behalf, to the good and, methinks, needlessly angered town.'

'Who should that be, William Moorcroft?' said the first challenger to his comrade. 'Our master, Armourer Firebrace, is appointed commissioner for the Parliament in Birmingham: leawise, as soon as the committee in London shall know that he is willing to take on him the business and office. But Tubal Bromycham is named captain of the town, for all warlike concernment. And as for the prophet who hath escaped from the tyrant's dungeons at Nottingham, and brings us such comfortable tidings and assurances, he himself doth but announce him as a spiritual light and pillar of fire through the wilderness before us.'

'With whether of these three would you have speech, master lawyer? Methinks the matter of your business will inform yourself the best,' replied William Moorcroft.

'But is there not one of greater power, for the nonce, among you than

all these, seeing he is reported the prime mover and stirrer of the whole?' said Grimsorwe, rather hesitatingly.

'Captain Cromwell, he means—the stranger officer of the Parliament—who sluttered so to the people with his tongue from the Guildhall window, but hath ordered all things so soldierly among us against an onset from the old Nebuchadnezzar at Aston,' observed the former speaker.

'Yes, *Captain Cromwell*—that is the man's name I am more specially directed to reason withal, as representing London Parliament in this sorrowful outbreak and sedition, which I fear will bring upon the town a sudden and sharp reprisal from the cavaliers,' said Grimsorwe, affecting to pronounce the name as if it was strange in his ears. 'Lead me to him.'

'But was it so put to us as our duty? Were we not to take the newsmen and prisoners to Tubal, as relating to the proper watch and ward of the town against its enemies?' deliberated William Moorcroft to his companion.

'I am a civilian, come on civil business and ambassage merely; and I do not desire to speak with Captain Cromwell in any military sense, but as the prime agent and answerer for the Parliament in these parts,' said Grimsorwe.

'Come then, but out of your coach; there be chains and barriers erected farther on,' said Moorcroft, after a little aside with his mate. 'We shall find Master Cromwell at the Black Boy, for after he had appointed us all our posts, and left Tubal in command at the Old Cross, I did hear him sweetly entreat the gifted man, Wrath-of-God Whitehall, to accompany him thither home, and exchange some comforting soul-experiences, as well as discourse more fully of the strange miracle of the blowing down of the King's flag on Nottingham Castle towers, which, with his own prison-wearied eyes, the good man saw.'

While this statement was being made, Richard Grimsorwe had alighted from his equipage. But, with discreet attention to his own personal safety, before placing himself in the hands of the irritated townsmen of Birmingham, he remarked, 'I nothing doubt your safeguard, gentlemen; but my father, Sir Thomas, has for hostage of it, in his hands at Aston, the fair soft person of your master-armourer's daughter, Mistress Dorothy Firebrace.'

'Good God! what say you? There have been seekers all over the town for her these two hours! Did you of Aston kidnap the maiden at the Cherry Orchard? for there old Mahala reported she had gone, and none could give further tidings of her after,' exclaimed William Moorcroft.

'Nay; she placed herself willingly in our hands,' returned the malicious messenger, 'for the sake of my brother's handsome face, and some pretty promises. I do not doubt he has whistled the fair wench from the hedge.'

'This will be strange news for my master, the armourer. I will take in the messenger, and then hurry to him with it,' said William Moorcroft, evidently greatly dismayed and astonished with the intelligence. 'He can scarce be in worse fears for her now; but there will be no

thanks for the messenger, I am thinking. Where is the tinker boy, that promised to keep up the fire for us? I will send him on that business.'

The prudent sentinel called 'Jack! Jack Bunyan!' once or twice before he could awaken the lad in question, who was stretched on the grass, with his begrimed visage turned up to the warm glow of the watchfire. Who knows? perchance even then collecting experiences for the inspired vision of his future times, and feeling the remote glory of the Celestial City in the coarse but comforting glare of a coal fire, in an open field, under the canopy of heaven! Moorcroft gave him his untoward errand, and then announced to Grimsorwe that he was ready to attend him to Captain Cromwell's quarters.

As the Black Boy and Woolpack stood in those days exactly where it stands now, there is no occasion to say that these were behind the Church of St. Martin, in the centre of the town; chosen by Cromwell chiefly on that account: for the landlady, who was a widow, a handsome and jolly woman, and a great gossip of Dame Cooper, the loyal High Bailiff's wife—was not at all well affected to the Parliament captain's party. On the contrary, she took every opportunity she could to rail at and deride it, and had even exhibited herself so little complaisant and obliging to her guest that, but for the excellent reasons he had of his own to prefer her house, it is most probable Captain Cromwell would soon have ceased to bed and board at the Black Boy and Woolpack.

In truth, Grimsorwe, on his arrival under guard, found Mistress Mellons in close and apparently amazed and panic-stricken confabulation, before the doors, with the bailiff's wife, who had doubtless made her way to her gossip's from the Moat House, to ascertain the meaning and progress of the alarming events of which the town of Birmingham was now the scene.

Simon Fairservice, the Black Boy ostler, was rubbing down a bespattered and exhausted steed, at a little distance, which the Aston envoy instantly recognised as his brother's favourite and pampered riding-horse, which he had chosen from all his father's valuable stud. It was plain the poor beast had fallen now upon a harder service.

'Heard mortal now ever the like?' Dame Cooper was saying, as Grimsorwe approached, in a high tone, as if indignation had got the better of prudence on the sudden. 'I did not marvel so much to see my fat fool come pelting home to the Moat House, like an ox with a gadfly to water, on the first stir in the Market Place this morning. But I thought at first it was only some discontent on the people's part as to the lord's butter-dues; which, indeed, are an old-standing grudge. Whereas now it is, say you, that the town is in arms against his most sacred Majesty's own dues and authority! But there will be a reckoning for all, and that before we see the snow again, or I am as daft a babbler as mine old knave himself. But it troubles me, gossip, it troubles me mightily, you should give such a villain and traitor harbourage in your house. It may twist yourself, my woman, in some turn of his rope!'

'What can I do, my good lady? As I hope to be saved, I have done

what in me lay to make the Black Boy no home for a Parliament rogue, save and except refusing the necessary offices of my trade, which the town would not suffer,' replied the landlady sorrowfully. 'Deem you it is much of a pleasure to me to see my best and jolliest customers discountenanced by a psalm-singing, canting Puritan of a knave like this pretended captain, forsooth, in his greasy old leather doublet and hose? His nose itself is a lying hypocrite, or else he got it so well steeped of yore that it hath not yet had time to sober itself, for it shows at whites as coppery as a new brass pan; yet the man scarce stomachs a gallon of ale a week in my house. Even now, he is upstairs in his chamber, snivelling and weeping and praising God, in a snuffle and whine, like a pair of wheezy bellows, for his mercies, in bringing him to the acquaintance and companionship of a stray lunatic preacher, Tom-a-Bedlam, who hath escaped his chains and strayed hither, I know not how. Yea, but awhile ago, as I passed where they are liquoring each other with their overflowing eyes—but never a drop of anything cherishing to man, for the good of the house—I did overhear Master Cromwell entreat the precious soul, forsooth, to be even as a new Samuel to the Saul he hath set up among us; who, if he is not by a head taller than all other Birmingham men (it's his name, too), is as giant as Goliath in his strength and goodwill to the cause.'

'What is that, I wonder?'

'God 'a mercy! what times we are come upon! My poor husband will never have the heart to provide for all the hanging that will soon be to do in the town, when his Majesty marches this way,' lamented the bailiff's loyal spouse.

'He!—he is good for nothing but love-days, and merry-makings, and fair-junketings! Not but what that is much, Dame Cooper, and a real favour of Providence to us poor tapster folk, to have set at the head of a well-guided town. Howbeit, God fits the back to the burden, else a poor widow like me had long since given way under mine, and rather than that some of these hypocritical rogues should miss their dues—But whom have we here? A fair even to you, sirs; what do you lack?'

The buxom mistress of the Black Boy seemed now, for the first time, to notice the arrival of Grimsorwe and his guard, who had been civilly waiting for some cessation in the gossip; but, finding none likely to take place in any given time, now pushed somewhat rudely past.

'We lack nothing but a sight of the worthy captain you have lodged above, mistress,' replied William Moorcroft; 'unless you will measure me a draught of ale, with a stroke of chalk for a tape-wand, for it is not wages night, you wot.'

'Let him drink what he will at my expense,' said Grimsorwe, graciously, and thinking it not unlikely that a talk over a flagon would spread his news and calumnies.

The smith-sentinel—whose trade was as thirsty in the seventeenth as in the nineteenth century—seemed well enough pleased with the announcement, and ushered up the envoy with more marks of deference than he had hitherto deemed necessary or advisable. 'It is well seen in you, sir, that you have gentleman's blood in your veins, however you

came by it,' he courteously remarked as they ascended a very narrow dark staircase. 'But what manner of caterwauling is this? Nay, by the rood, 'tis Master Cromwell and the persecuted man from Nottingham joining together in a thanksgiving song!'

CHAPTER XXII.

CROMWELL AND GRIMSORWE.

IT was even so. Two voices, one of them deep and strong, but hoarse and broken as the sound of the sea on a rocky shore; the other a wild, shrill piping, like the upper notes of an organ played out of tune, united in anything but harmony, came to Grimsorwe's hearing as his conductor spoke. But in spite of the strange discordancy in pitch, it was plain the 'thanksgiving song' must have been one familiarly known among the enthusiastic religionists of the age, since they kept the words very well together in point of time, and when the door was opened appeared at their work without a book.

God is our strength; in Him we trust;
Not in the arm of flesh and dust;
Not in the steel of shield or spear,
Horseman or chariot's hot career.

He only hath the power to save
The creature of His breath,
Who rose from out the wormy grave,
And drew the sting of death!

Wash me, oh, wash me with the Lamb!—
Though I be earth's most rancid ram,
Jordan's sweet stream can make me nice
For holy Abel's sacrifice.

With herbs of grace then deck my horns,
And lead me to the altar's foot,
Where thankfully, amid men's scorns,
My blood shall change to snow my soot!

So absorbed were the two praise-givers in their devout business, that, although both their countenances were towards the door, neither appeared to take any notice of the stranger's arrival. Grimsorwe, whose cold and sceptical nature made the exhibition a subject of secret contempt and mockery to him, nevertheless immediately took off his hat, as if he had felt himself in some hallowed presence, and reverently waited the conclusion, while he furtively scrutinised the tear-blotched and yet enthusiasm-lighted visages before him. Nor, keen, penetrating, and incredulous as was his own intellect, could he determine to his satisfaction—any more than the acutest of subsequent historians—whether the wonderful man on whom he gazed, somewhat guessing of his future eminence, was in reality the impassioned fanatic he appeared, or one of those greatest of actors who make the world their stage, and the times in which they live their own, by their power to receive and give vitality to the master impulses and emotions of their epocha.

Even when the jarring harmony came to its ludicrously protracted nasal close, on the word 'soot,' neither of the singers seemed in-

clined to bestow any attention out of their own immediate range of ideas.

‘Of a verity and indeed, good, sweet soul, Master Whitehall, these are times when all poor, worthy, harmless Christian people may and do, in a sort, as I say, consider themselves bound to the altar, and ready to have their throats cut, if it so pleases the Lord, unto His glory,’ Captain Cromwell said, in a most sorrowful, whining tone, as if he were actually bleating in some such dilemma. ‘I do hear from out the county of Stafford, how the silly, poor, well-affected, godly people there in the town, dare not so much as go to church on the Sabbath-day but armed, for fear of the Popishers, and yet have had the good resolution and owning of the cause as to cast out the prelatical wolves, sent among them as shepherds by little Laud, even from his stopped earth-hole in the Tower of London—little in size, but mickle in mischief! And for my own part, though I am of small account in so great a matter—less than a sand of the shore, to keep out the whelm of waters—yet truly I may say I am as ready as another, and will show myself so, to seal my testimony with my blood. And truly, from what you say, there can be no manner of doubt the Philistines do now gather their arms together for warfare to fight Israel! And of a further surety I must say I never heard anything more comforting than your account of the blowing down of the standard—though there be some, I nothing doubt, who boast themselves of a more worldly wisdom and policy, would tell you its erection is the greater sign and portent to the world. And so it is, in a sort; for now will be known the true temper of men’s minds, and who are with us and who are against us. And in good faith, though I did purpose it all along, considering the infinite advantages of this place and town to all soldiering purposes, I am better pleased now than ever that Birmingham hath owned herself so heartily and honestly at one with us of the Parliament. And truly much is owing to you, sweet-savoured Master Whitehall, for so towardly a disposing of men’s minds. And I do trust in you, I may say, speaking not so much of my own particular as in the general, as representing in some sort the Committee of Parliament in these parts—to keep the plough in the furrow, and the good town fixed and firm in the way it should go. And, truly, I must say the work has gone on at a pace, and I do myself marvel unto myself how some weak instruments, otherwise in themselves incapable, are raised up to mighty works, even as with as slender a means as a little trowel the mason buildeth up great temples unto the Lord, and palaces unto kings. Though this be rather, ’tis to be thought, to a contrariwise effect in some matters; for who knoweth, indeed, whether it be not as you declare, and that the reign of the saints of God is at hand?’

‘It is, it is! Have I not declared unto you how after my conflict with the great Red Dragon in my dungeon, just as I was sinking and choking in the blood thereof that mounted even unto the black bare granite ceiling, a voice as of one speaking through a silver trumpet proclaimed to all the nations of the earth that the fulness of time was at hand, and that I must needs be saved from the destruction and captivity around me, that I might go forth and build up the throne for

Him who is to be seated upon it? And immediately the gore of blood o'erflooding me and choking up to my mouth and ears, fell like water from a bather's limbs from encompassing me, and I found myself dry and clean and unscathed amidst my dungeon straw !

Such was the fugitive of Nottingham's rejoinder to his military friend's rather long-winded address.

Cromwell evidently mused for a few moments on the query, during which pause his eye wandered, but with perfect absence of observation, on Richard Grimsorwe's motionless form.

'And you would begin the preparation in this ding-dong town of smiths and anvils, mean you?' the captain continued thoughtfully. 'Well, for my part, I see not that there is much to hinder you at this present ; and the more thoroughly the good town commits itself to the great cause, the less should any that favour it be disposed to thwart you in any such-like tendency. As for the High Bailiff—or rather his wife—and their some half-score favourers in the town, I think there is no great fear of them, though they do threat a meeting in the church, since even a window of the Guildhall, which is well-furnished of such, is denied them. And for the mad, choleric knight at Aston—Tubal Bromycham, whom I have named, in the Committee's name, Captain-at-Arms among you—and ten of his sturdy anvilmen with their hammers, and the advantage of the closed causeways, can keep out all danger in that direction. And Tubal hath great wrongs to avenge, and such hopes to entice, that he is assured to us body and soul. The only danger is the King's approach ; but ere he is like to be much nigher, I do hope, by my humble representations of the conveniences of this place for smiting the adversary on all hands, to move my cousin Hampden, and other Parliament gentlemen of more consideration than my poor ploughman-tongued self, to direct the godly army hitherwards ! What ! ye shall perchance owe to me, ye of Birmingham, the goodliest sight that may be—a battle of freemen for their liberty and religion ! Howsoever the issue may be, which is also in God's hands, who chasteneth whom He loveth—and whether we have deserved as yet well of Him I know not, for there is much backsliding and a holding back of the hand from the plough visible now on all sides, which makes it the more necessary that some should step boldly forward, and urge on the team, that there should be no return until the edge of the field is reached ! And who can deny that a few hours' willing labour is better worth than as many days of statute contribution ?

'And are not labourers hired with you, too, sir, at all hours of the day ?' Grimsorwe now ventured to break in with, for he began to be tired of his part of listener to what sounded to him little better than the usual run of fanatic ravings, though perhaps a little wilder.

'And who art thou, friend, that ask the question ? I see not that you stand with a straw in your mouth to be hired,' Captain Cromwell replied, in a tone that seemed to indicate, however little he had shown signs, that he had been considering the personal attributes of the speaker before he thus obtruded on attention.

'My name is Richard Grimsorwe, and the outside of my business, honourable sir, with you, is to negotiate the release of my father's well-

born son, Edward Holte. The kernel and inside requires a more private cracking and mastication,' returned Richard, adopting, as well as he could, the metaphorical style in vogue among the Puritan party from admiration and imitation of the Biblical one.

'Your name is *Richard Grimsorwe*, and your brother's Holte? I smell a fault there!' said Cromwell, with a quaint saturnine smile. 'Howbeit I have heard of the man at Aston, and of his lustful outrageous doings, which make him one of the crying sins of this countryside. And you wish to speak with me alone?'

'On matter, sir, of concernment as high as it should be secret.'

'Are you weaponed?'

'I searched and took his sword from him at the barriers, captain, as you bade should be done with all incomers,' spoke up William Moorcroft.

'Soldierly executed. Leave the man then with me, good friends; I will hear what he hath to say.'

'I also, for am I not also clothed with authority, albeit not yet even as a garment white and shining as the sun?' said Whitehall, making no gesture to imitate Moorcroft's ready retirement, who knew that a comfortable ale-pot awaited him below.

'In all *spiritual* matters, yea, brother; and I would that you should note your limitations therein, or there will soon be discord and confusion among ye, to the laughter and hooting of the adversary. Go home now, to the worthy elder of the town, whose skin is of as many colours as ever Jacob's coat, but who hath given you a welcome to bed and board, and refresh your inward man, for you have need of rest and food, methinks.' And taking the still reluctant fugitive of Nottingham by the shoulders, Captain Cromwell escorted him to the door with a degree of gentle violence which was yet felt as resistless by his worn and attenuated frame.

When he turned from this action, after carefully closing the door, Grimsorwe was really startled by the sudden change in Cromwell's manner. He stood before him bolt upright, and with a masterful though suspicious expression of countenance, and discarding apparently at will both the language and peculiar nasal whine of the Puritanism of the day, which has been transmitted to our own, said, with stern, uncompromising directness, 'So, sir! you are the bastard son of Sir Thomas Holte, of Aston Hall; what want you with me?'

Grimsorwe was for the moment startled by so informal an address. But only for a moment. 'You guess me in some sort rightly, sir, but not altogether. I am the *reputed* bastard son of Sir Thomas Holte; but were I not most bitterly wronged and deprived by an unjust ascendancy, I am in truth his eldest, or rather only, lawfully-begotten son and heir,' he said.

'Why, how is that?' returned Cromwell, with a deep-furrowed frown. 'You must not think to cozen me. I have shaken the very dust out of the meal of intelligence in these parts, and I know that Richard Grimsorwe is Sir Thomas Holte's bastard elder son, a lawyer of Gray's Inn, London, and that Edward Holte is his lawful heir, by a nobly-born lady.'

'Tis so given out, I deny not,' returned Grimsorwe, his lividly dark complexion deepening in hue. 'Nevertheless, the true state of the case is this—that Sir Thomas Holte was secretly married to my mother, who, though poor and powerlessly friendless, was of more honourable birth and descent than himself. And only when his passion cooled in possession, and his eye was caught elsewhere, bethought him to deny what was but witnessed by a serving-man of his own, and a poor, since crazy, woman, my grandmother, and a milk-livered dependent chaplain of his house. And my poor mother, having been driven to despair and suicide—or else more basely cheated of her life—and myself but rescued by the merest chance from sharing her watery doom—thus, and thus only, it hath ensued that I am bastardised, and the young man in your custody struts the world as heir of Aston Hall!'

Cromwell listened with great attention to this revelation, crimping his brows together, and with the tips of his right-hand fingers drawing down his under lip, until all the large, firm-set white teeth were visible from fang-tooth to fang-tooth.

'Why, St. John sometimes sings to those who will listen some such a song as this,' he remarked. 'I marvel whether all bastards deem themselves the lawful inheritors! Howbeit, this one tells his story, lawyer-like, skilfully, and means surely something by it more than a grandame's ingleside gossip! Well, sir,' he concluded, with a resumption of the practical directness previously observed upon, 'why do you tell me this tale? In what concerns it me?'

'I wish you to understand that you see before you a wronged and dispossessed man, that you may the readier trust in my assurances that I desire to be of service to the Parliament, in the belief that only from its power and success can I, and such as I, look for redress of grievances.'

'I do understand this much, truly, that you conceive your own interests to lie that way. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, sir; I know not how this can induce me to serve you in the matter of this brother, whom you deny to be your father's heir. And I must fairly tell you, I have heard nothing so much to the advantage of the man whose name you give yourself, that I should trust my ears in any absolute manner to what you may say.'

'I ask you only to believe me on my proofs, Master Cromwell,' said Grimsorwe, adding boldly, 'But whatever may have been the errors of my youth also, men in Lincoln's Inn still preserve some memory of the wild roystering doings of a certain Oliver Cromwell, some time student there, and now a forward leader and expounder among the precisian and godly party—who do purpose, I foregather, to make as great changes in all England as hath been wrought by Providence in themselves.'

Grimsorwe had calculated correctly. The Puritan leader looked neither scandalised nor annoyed at the sharp rejoinder.

'You are right, young man,' he said, 'you are right. In my youth I have been as little to be commended as any other sinner that can be named, but who hath persevered in his villanies and harlotries unto grey hairs, which, God be praised, is not my case. I have been a sinner—

the chief of sinners !—and therefore I judge not ; neither do I pronounce but that you also may now, or at some other time, prove a true convert from yourself. Methinks you spoke of *proof* ; and you must allow it needs some of your good meaning to the cause, coming out of Nazareth, as you do.'

'I do confess it ; but, first, you must pledge me your word and faith that never—so may God help you—you will betray my counsel and working in this matter, which would be to my manifest ruin and overthrow with my father and all his alliance,' said Richard Grimsorwe.

The earnestness of the demand evidently surprised Cromwell, and excited his attention. But it was with as evident reluctance, and on a strongly reiterated demand, that he complied, murmuring to himself repeatedly, 'Swear not at all, swear not at all.' Still, it may be imagined that it was in nowise with disappointed interest that he listened to the important communication with which Grimsorwe followed up his preliminary stipulations.

He revealed to Cromwell the unguarded and almost defenceless position of the King at Nottingham. He informed him he was certainly aware that Charles's person was only protected in his quarters by about three hundred infantry, and the trained bands of the county. That his main force of foot, and all his artillery, remained behind in the neighbourhood of York, for want of the means of transport for the latter, and the former awaiting the protracted arrival of the purchases of arms and ammunition making by the Queen in Holland, before it could be of any service in the field ; while his entire cavalry—all but a few score gentlemen who mounted loyal guard on his person—had been sent into the west, under Prince Rupert, to assist in and cover the great royalist rising there under the Marquis of Hertford. But the audacious inference Grimsorwe drew from all these circumstances, the suggestion he started, were in good truth addressed to a spirit whose executive daring and readiness of acceptance more than matched. He proposed to Cromwell to collect all the Parliament forces at his disposal, as Commissioner for the three associated counties of Cambridge, Huntingdon, and Bedfordshire ; his own troop of well-armed and well-mounted cavalry above all, at Birmingham ; and, by a sudden inroad into the King's quarters, seize on his Majesty's person, and conclude the war at a blow !

Cromwell's usually dull and inanimate eyes shone up with extraordinary lustre and vivacity as he listened.

'In truth, in truth,' he exclaimed, 'there is but one man in England to whom you could have wisely counselled this ; and it is he who told his recruits to stand on no nice ceremony, for that he would as soon fire his pistol in the King's face, in battle, as any other man's ! And indeed, if things should fall out so, as you reason they may, you will have a good right to any man's birthdom—let alone an usurping brother's—for such a mess of indigestible porridge as you shall have mixed for our enemies. But how may a man believe such folly even of rash despisers as we have in the cavaliers, to leave the main prize of the war thus, as it were, under a swoop ? I have heard some whisperings of this before, 'tis true. The witty madman who was here erewhile, and who fights with Red

Dragons in his dungeons, could not multiply the armed men he espied at the standard-raising into anything like a host fit to guard a king; but I never believed it until now. Nay, do I believe it now? Why should I?’

‘Here is evidence not to be denied, sir,’ replied Grimsorwe, producing a letter from his breast-pocket. ‘But you must faithfully return it to me, since I have purloined it from my father’s secret desk, as he deems it. A letter from Sir Jacob Astley, Major-General of the King’s forces, expounding to Sir Thomas Holte the full destitute condition of affairs at Nottingham, and earnestly putting it to him thereupon to equip and send his promised troop of horse under my brother at once to the town of Nottingham.’

Cromwell eagerly took and perused the document. It was clear that it amply confirmed all the statements made.

‘I did know—I did surmise—it hath been revealed to me in many and divers forms,’ he exclaimed, with an extraordinary brightness lighting up his wontedly sombre and staid visage, ‘that I am chosen forth as a great instrument in the mighty and marvellous works of the Lord that shall be in these days. But, to imagine that it should be thrust upon me all at once, to save and redeem these unhappy kingdoms from a deluge of blood and misery; that I should be the David in the cave of Saul, to cut off his garment, yet not to injure him—something takes my breath, I do confess, by the suddenness of it. I did not think it should have been thus, either; but that, after the tyrant had dyed his purple so horribly in our blood that men’s eyes in England would no more endure the hue. What am I saying? I know not! It is the Lord’s will. I must seek the Lord in prayer; I must, I must. It was not given even unto him whose songs most delighted the Lord of Hosts, always to lead right forward to the battle: sometimes he was to fetch a compass behind the mulberry-trees at the enemy’s back, and then there was to be, as it were, a rustling in the upper branches before he made the onset—a wind of God’s just revenge and judgment on the Philistine. But what is this man? Is he a rod of the Lord? The breath of Cain is in his nostrils; yet he speaks understandingly, and as one sent, whether he knoweth or not the Sender! I must seek the Lord—I must seek the Lord!’

And Cromwell was apparently about to quit the room on this religious business, though it was difficult to say whither he meant to resort for an oracle, when Richard Grimsorwe arrested his step.

‘You are going, Master Cromwell,’ he said, ‘and I know it, to despatch some swift horsemen for your command to assemble at once on my advised enterprise. But ere you go, I do desire you to begin to show some sense that I have deserved well at your hands by—’

‘Yea, yea, you are free to depart, to return at once to Aston; but I cannot suffer you to do any harm to the prisoner in my charge,’ said Cromwell, pausing, and evidently surprised at the skilful divination of his real secret intentions on the part of the other, and thinking he had himself as accurately inferred Grimsorwe’s.

‘On the contrary, I ask you, captain, to order me to be kept a prisoner also in Birmingham—but under your own solemn safeguard, and out of my brother’s sight and way,’ replied Grimsorwe.

Cromwell did now look rather puzzled. 'Do you want to drive the old man at Aston fairly mad?' he said, 'or what is it? Moreover, we have no cause of detention against you. You have not applied for arms for the King's faction, or otherwise flown in the teeth of any ordinance of the Parliament.'

'I purpose now to do so,' grinned Grimsorwe. 'I am going to the Manor House to call upon the High Bailiff to proceed at once to an open and forcible rescue of my brother.'

Cromwell burst into a huge, hearty cachinnation. 'Deserve my severity, then,' he remarked, 'and you shall experience it. But, in good truth, yours must needs be a spirit of some deepest sounding, since I can only see the fins of your sharks—not what their jaws are agape after. I could have divined, now, a reason if you had turned earnest conditioner with me for your brother's *release*.'

'His release!' Grimsorwe exclaimed, and looked astonished in his turn.

'Ay: for, being of so forward and courageous a temper, you might have relished seeing him in the front lines of these coming warlike times of ours,' replied Cromwell; adding with a dark and troubled glance, 'My God! where shall we end, since we begin with fratricidal longings in our hearts?'

Grimsorwe was about to make, probably, some attempt to repudiate the feelings ascribed to him—for even the worst of villains do not like to hear their wickedness called by its true name; but precisely at the instant the door was thrown unceremoniously open, and Master Armourer Firebrace made his unexpected appearance, closely followed by Bunyan, the tinker-boy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HUMAN FEELING v. POLITICAL.

THE circumstance was, however, speedily explained. 'I come, Master Cromwell,' Firebrace exclaimed, with a wild and haggard look, 'to have your immediate order for a release of the prisoner, Edward Holte—without which the men you have placed in guard of him will not suffer it—in exchange for my daughter, Dorothy, whom the cavaliers have seized at play in the town, and carried off to Aston Hall.'

'Ay, ay, indeed; they were trustworthy poor souls whom I have found in this town, whom I set in the business: poor, wearied Sisyphus Turnour, the bellows-blower, and one Come-What-Will-Faithful Moggs, a creature of a sweet savour in his soul, though but a stinking tanner of his trade—I did not think but what they would desire to have my free-will and judgment in anything to be done regarding the prisoner. What is it you would have then, say you, Master Firebrace?'

'Sir Thomas Holte hath imprisoned my daughter—so this young man reports from one who knoweth it with his eyes—until he hath his son in exchange. That is what I would have: let the young man go, and let me redeem my child out of the furnace,' said Firebrace, with tears

gushing, in spite of every effort to restrain them, from his hard and staring fixed eyes.

'Tut, tut, man! call you this a persevering even unto the end? We cannot surrender the prisoner but to our great loss and detriment. What is to keep the town well set on its desperation but this personal quarrel? Were Edward Holte released, we should be all at sixes and sevens again. What risk does your daughter run in her captivity? What! we are not Barbary men, nor is Sir Thomas altogether the keeper of a sultan's retinue and seraglio. 'Tis an old man; what fear you? All is well, if but you have courage to abide by my declaration to you, without further questioning, that all *is*—well.'

'I can truly aver, sir,' said Grimsorwe, 'that the maiden placed herself freely in my father's hands, as hostage for his son. What may be between my brother and your daughter to make her so kind to him, I know not; but so it is.'

'It is all a lie; she hath been inveigled and treacherously seized,' returned Firebrace, passionately. 'My daughter is betrothed to a most worthy man of this town—to Tubal Bromycham; and would you drive me on going to him with a tale like this at my heels, to win him to release Edward Holte by force from your bellows-blower and tanner, two as hateful Anabaptist villains as are in the town? And is this what all your fine counsels, and our rash acceding unto the same, are to do for us of Birmingham?'

'I will pray God to bless my counsels to you: man is no further master of the event than he who lets out the waters can give them their bounds and demarcations too. What if thy vineyard be overflowed, friend? Shall the whole country perish of drought, rather?'

'I will go to Tubal, I will go to Tubal at once; he will not believe these lies. My fair child shall not remain another hour at Aston Hall!' And the armourer rushed frantically out.

'Silly man, silly man. But these things must be, I fear, while we use human instruments,' said Cromwell, perhaps rather in his heart compassionating the father's emotion, for he also was one. 'Howbeit, were it my own—my pretty little Frances, even—what must be, must be. I must keep friends with the good man, too, for he hath a great sway in Birmingham, and I shall need some hastening now in my preparations for the field, though they be towardly enough. He will find Tubal meanwhile, I trust, very green wood to his crackling of harmless fire. But the Lord will guide me, I am sure. Who are you, young man, and why do you stare at me so wonderingly?'

These latter words were addressed to the tinker-boy, who was in reality gazing with simple but rapt intensity of contemplation at the personage whose own attention had been thus suddenly caught by it.

Bunyan was startled; even, as it seemed, for the moment alarmed. 'Nay, sir,' he said, 'it is but with a due reverence; but the prophet hath been a-telling us all down below, while we waited your leisure, that you are the mighty strong angel, of whom it is written in a book called Revelations, that you should come down from heaven clothed with a cloud, and a rainbow on your head, and set your right foot upon the sea and your left foot upon the earth, and cry with a loud voice, as

when a lion roareth, "By Him that liveth for ever and ever, time shall be no more!"'

'Said he so?' returned Cromwell, with an excited expression, which almost immediately faded into one of more commonplace and worldly, perhaps almost ridiculing import, 'Why, then, friend, the prophet hath greatly overstated me.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE WATCH OF BIRMINGHAM.

MEANWHILE, Armourer Firebrace, driven by the impatience and anguish of his spirit to disregard all but the main consequence he dreaded, proceeded to the appointed head-quarters of the Captain of the Watch of Birmingham. This, it appeared, was Tubal Bromycham's title as military commandant of the town, and his quarters had been established for him by Cromwell at a small building on Gosta Green, called the Welsh Cross, as the most likely point of attack from Aston Hall. Several roads, indeed, debouched into the town at this point, which it commanded.

The structure itself was a low isolated elevation of one story, on open archways, surmounted by a lantern tower, pinnaced by a cross of fretted freestone, pierced to represent nail-holes.

Under the archways, accommodated with benches and tables, and bread and cheese in abundance, were assembled about a score of stout young fellows, well armed, and chiefly in smiths' leather aprons. These were to be relieved at intervals by other parties of the townsmen, who had responded with readiness to the energetic impulse of Cromwell, acting in the first place on the master armourer and his fellow-chiefs of the trades. And a laughing, merry, excited company they were, evidently enjoying a novel sense of the dignity of danger, and proud of their position in the vanguard of defence.

In the room above this open guardhouse, reached by a very narrow flight of steps, Firebrace knew he should find the Captain of the Watch in company with seven or eight young men who had been hastily constituted his under-officers. Of course he had free access thither; and, mounting, the unhappy father distinguished as he approached the upper chamber frequent bursts of laughter mingled with shouts of the most uproarious applause.

'Alack, alack-a-day! he is treating his new mates to a love-cup. Little wots he of the sorrow in store!' thought the armourer. And a strange sickness of heart induced him to pause as he reached the open entrance of the chamber. He then perceived with some surprise the occasion of the demonstration. In fact he could scarcely at first believe that he really beheld what he saw.

Standing at a table plentifully supplied with flagons of foaming ale, and surrounded by the jolly noisy company whose uproar Firebrace had noticed below, was Tubal Bromycham. But he could scarcely have been recognised under his new aspect. He was clad from head to foot

in a suit of most beautifully-wrought and flagreed armour, excepting at the head, which was bare; and so great a change had this warlike panoply made in his appearance, that it was no wonder Firebrace himself was puzzled at the identity in other respects. His massive head and strenuous limbs, could scarcely, however, be said to show to advantage under the polished plates of metal that encased them, and the disproportion of his bulk to his height was greatly exaggerated, though the effect was in favour of the young man's power to wield the heavy weapons with which he was also furnished, in the shape of a sword and a ponderous double-headed axe.

Tubal had evidently been addressing some harangue, very favourably received, though perhaps somewhat confusedly delivered, to his comrades. Firebrace distinguished the latter words: 'And thus, my mates—gentlemen, I would say—I trust I have shown unto you that I, and I alone, Tubal Bromycham, am the true Lord of the Manor and inheritor thereof, as soon as I shall have wrung from the tyrant representative of tyrants the rights of my birthdom: until when my proofs to you shall lie chiefly in the swing and power of my own right arm, in defence of this town of mine and of my ancestry!'

A thunder of applause followed this conclusion, and, as if with one accord, the young fellows all started up, replenished their flagons, and drank to the health of 'Tubal the Smith, Lord of Birmingham.'

By this time Firebrace was in the midst of the company; and, interrupting the clamour of joyful excitement, suddenly recalled Tubal to the matter-of-fact world by informing him that his betrothed had been captured by some base stratagem, and was then a prisoner at Aston Hall; and that Sir Thomas Holte would by no means consent to her surrender, saving in exchange for his son, whom Master Cromwell, on the other hand, did most masterfully and cruelly refuse to yield up.

Tubal came hastily down from his high flight upon this statement.

'Dorothy!—a prisoner!—at Aston Hall!' he exclaimed.

'Let us go there at once, and tear her from the old devil's claws!' yelled several of the excited young fellows.

'You will not find that so easy, gentlemen,' said an unknown voice at this moment, and Firebrace perceived with astonishment that he had been closely followed into the apartment by a stranger.

The stranger was Richard Grimsorwe. 'Aston Hall,' Richard resumed boldly, 'is barricaded at all points, and defended by my brother's troop of stout yeomen, albeit but rustily armed. The girl, Dorothy, is placed by her own free will and action in my father's hands, for the love, doubtless, she bears Edward Holte, whom you have unlawfully imprisoned among you! She is under lock and key, and bolt and bar, in the top chamber there in the Great Dome. You can do no more than provoke Sir Thomas to worse violences towards her by any effort on your part, unless you had great guns, and men who know how to manage them. And I am come to propose to the chiefs of the town, whom I understand to be you, Smith Bromycham, and you, Master Armourer Firebrace, a fair exchange between our prisoners. And if the stranger, who has taken upon himself such mastery, will not suffice, it, possess yourselves of Edward Holte by force from his satellites. He

may be a London Parliament man, but hath he, for that reason, a right to rule in Birmingham ?

'So say I, so say I,' exclaimed Firebrace. 'Take Master Holte from the hold of the Anabaptist villains placed on his guard, and yield him to Aston forthwith in exchange for my child, of whom it is—it shall be—most false to say, she hath wilfully deserted her own alliance and friending for Aston Hall.'

Tubal looked at the armourer at this moment with a singular expression. 'I know not that—I know not that, good father !' he muttered. 'There are spells of strange magic belonging to the family there. They are cursed by a witch ; but perchance, with their evil fascination, Dorothy also may have become the victim of the Holte sorcery ! And let us not stir too rashly in this matter,' he continued, gazing almost wildly around among his companions. 'Ye all know the two Anabaptist men, Sisyphus the bellows-blower, and Faithful Moggs ; and I did hear them swear to Captain Cromwell they would rather slay their prisoner than suffer him to escape their guard !'

'So will they do, if they die on it !' exclaimed one of the company. 'Sisyphus is a man wearied of life, yet of a mad fanatic zeal to win what he deems the crown of martyrdom ; and Faithful Moggs doth so abhor the very name of gentleman, that for its sake alone——'

'We cannot rescue Edward Holte by force ; 'tis not to be thought of ; it would ruin all to quarrel now with the Parliament man. Nor Dorothy either, if it be true she is so imprisoned, as this bringer of bad tidings sayeth,' lamented Tubal Bromycham, in a desponding tone.

'And have you so easily forgotten the base ignominy to which Sir Thomas Holte put you at Aston Hall, for some slight failure in your craft, Tubal ? Have you donned the armour of a knight and lord—of your own fashioning too, for more than a year—only to show yourself a craven and a submissive, beaten huckster hound in it ?' shouted old Firebrace, in the most exasperated accents. It was plain to Grimsorwe that he was not in the secret of the real affair at Aston, respecting Tubal Bromycham's quarrel with the haughty proprietor there.

'But, father,' returned Tubal, with a deep flush, 'Sir Thomas deemed me then but a poor, presumptuous mechanic of this town, whereof I am the lawful lord ! He will think differently of me soon, and repent him belike ; and so will others, too, perchance !'

'Arabella Holte, to wit,' thought Grimsorwe, but he did not venture to make the observation aloud.

Firebrace gave a bitter laugh. 'Will you leave your betrothed bride—the fairest maiden in Birmingham—in the hands of such men as Sir Thomas Holte and his bastard Richard are reported to be ?' he exclaimed.

'Is it not said, Zachariah Firebrace, that the maiden is so placed in a sort by her own consent ?' replied Tubal, inwardly ruminating, it was pretty evident, some deeper thought.

'At worst, then, it was because my daughter was indignant, as all honest folk and fair neighbours should be, at the unhandsome detention of the young man Holte,' groaned Firebrace. 'And I think we were all bewitched indeed when we yielded to a stranger's rash ordering as we have !'

'So deem not I, father,' returned Tubal. 'How else might I reclaim mine inheritance from the tyrannous usurpation of the Crown? And say you, sir, whoever you are, that Dorothy Firebrace is imprisoned in the Dome-Chamber of Aston Hall?'

'Even so; and before noon-day to-morrow, Rupert, the King's nephew, in Worcestershire, will despatch of his cavalry to my father's assistance there, and the overthrow of your sedition here,' said Richard Grimsorwe, fiercely, evidently resolved to hasten action against his brother, at whatever risk to himself.

It must be admitted that several of the noisiest of the recent revellers looked rather aghast at this announcement. More than one even shrunk away from the central group around Tubal, and gathered in separate knots to discuss the intelligence. Loud complaints were then audible as to the conduct of the Parliament officers. 'We were promised immediate help from London, before any could reach the Cavaliers at Aston. It were madness further to engage in the brawl till we know more!' many muttered, in reply to Firebrace's eager exhortations that they should march at once to Aston Hall to rescue his daughter. And for a wench who is in danger from her own wilfulness, seemed the general impression.

Tubal, in the meanwhile, remained for a few moments in deep meditation.

'Quit me of this cumbrous steel, friends,' he then observed, in a low voice, to some of his nearer comrades, 'I can nothing in it; methinks it seems to enchain my very mind with my muscles. Go, Father Firebrace,' he continued, while one or two of the young men began to unstrap the numerous buckles that fastened the pieces of armour together on his powerful frame, 'Go home, and expect good tidings from me shortly, if even Captain Cromwell will not be moved by my entreaties also. And you, sir, rid us of the presence of a traitorous spy!' he concluded, to Richard Grimsorwe, who, startled by the flash in those clear still-blue eyes, made an ironical bow, and took his departure somewhat hastily; but not before Zachariah Firebrace, who, highly indignant at the seeming *sang froid* and indifference with which his intelligence had been received, flung hastily out of the apartment.

Tubal was not satisfied until all his recent warlike panoply was removed from his stalwart limbs. He seemed then to breathe more freely; and his spirits also probably revived with the sense of freedom from physical restraint, for his companions noted a return of his accustomed energy of ideas and action almost as the last heavy plate fell from his limbs. 'I have been too long a smith in easy leathers to fit well into the lobster-coating of a knight and gentleman,' he remarked, with a singular kind of fierce playfulness in his smile and general expression. 'But the smith's craft shall perhaps serve me in better stead than the man-at-arms at this moment. I will resume my tools, even; they are in the chamber above. What I have done in donning armour and the like is of Master Cromwell's prompting, and but ill done, I fear me; but I will manage the next matter of my own head more to the purpose, I trust.'

He disappeared for a few moments in the lantern tower overhead, and

when he returned had a basket of tools, from which protruded the end of a crowbar, on his brawny shoulders. He then desired one of his comrades to keep his place as Captain of the Watch until he returned, and took his departure from the Welsh Cross with little further ceremony of leave-taking.

All who remained held it for certain that their captain was going to remonstrate with the Parliament officers on the detention of his betrothed, and propose means for her rescue. And so they might have thought for some short distance after he had crossed what was then the open verdant space, now covered with hobblely pavements, misnamed Gosta Green. But once fairly out of eyeshot of the Welsh Cross Keepers, Tubal Bromycham suddenly changed the direction of his steps from the town, and took that of Aston Hall.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ARTIST SMITH.

TUBAL BROMYCHAM was familiar with every step of the way to Aston Hall. A year, however, had elapsed, and more, since he had gone upon it, quitting it after his disgraceful maltreatment by Sir Thomas Holte with a vow of vengeance in his heart; which, nevertheless, he had either not found opportunity or resolution to put in any telling form of execution.

A passion more powerful than revenge, in the loving and generous heart of the disinherited Artisan-Lord of Birmingham, had hitherto, it is possible, restrained the promptings of the latter justly-excited feeling in his breast. Richard Grimsorwe had betrayed a family secret of his house also, in informing Dorothy of the true motives of the severities that had been exercised by his foster-brother towards Tubal. Sir Thomas's pride was so great that he scorned even to have it thought possible that a man whom he looked upon as a mere low-born mechanic, should have dared to dream of love towards his beautiful daughter; and, therefore, the Aston villagers and people at Birmingham had been left to believe that the quarrel between the baronet and the smith was on a question of work and wage, or carrying out the conditions of a contract. A scene of great violence had passed between them, it was nevertheless known, provoked by Sir Thomas's insolent fury in attempting to chastise Tubal with his horsewhip. But as the Birmingham smith's prodigious strength in the arms made him unable to measure his reprisals, and he was reported to have nearly strangled Sir Thomas in his pressure ere he flung him to an extraordinary distance, breathless and bleeding, on the ground, in sight of numerous menials and work-people—the punishment he was subjected to (in the stocks), and from the brutal violence used in overpowering him, seemed yet sufficiently provoked. Armourer Firebrace himself knew no otherwise, and had only concealed the facts from his daughter so carefully because he considered that—told as they might be—a girl of her spirit would be prone to regard a suitor who had suffered such an indignity with depreciating eyes;

and it had grown in time to be Firebrace's most earnest hope and purpose to marry his famous foreman to his daughter.

Indeed it was a strange story altogether, and one whose passionate depths of romance and tenderness, on one part at least, were not likely to be fathomed by ordinary observation.

It was not even surmised by his townsfolk in general that Tubal Bromycham was an artist of great genius, and possessed, in his powerful frame, all the acute sensibility, fervour of imagination, and vivid openness to external impressions that constitute the true artist whom Nature herself creates and fashions.

The chances of life which enabled Tubal's famous fellow-countryman to become the world's arch-poet, had put him on venting the beauty and poetical flowering of his soul in the hardest material agencies. He was, therefore, merely looked upon as a most skilful worker in iron—nothing more. But, endowed with all the fine susceptibilities and faculties alluded to, what marvel was there in the fate that befel Tubal in his young affections? that the exalted and haughty beauty which blazed upon him in the person of Arabella Holte should first excite the iron artist's ecstatic admiration, and then his most passionate and soul-absorbing love.

According to prevalent custom at that time, Arabella Holte had been placed, for the completion of her education and polish in courtly manners, in the household of a great lady who was a relation of her mother's, and resided a good deal in London. This was the consort of the Lord Keeper Lyttelton, whose daughter was affianced from infancy, and without the least thought of asking the consent of either party, to Edward Holte. Arabella had thus enjoyed the requisite opportunities to acquire every external embellishment to her extraordinary beauty. The court of Charles I., presided over by a French Queen, full of gaiety and delighting in festivity and magnificence, and chastened by his own refined and cultivated tastes, offered a perfect school for all that could add lustre to the possession of those choicer gifts of nature with which Arabella was endowed. And even Tubal's rapt and artistic imaginings had never shaped a brighter realisation of all that was charming and seductive in woman, than in this youthful lady, when, at the outbreak of the troubles between Charles and his Parliament, she returned to reside with her parents at Aston Hall, and he saw her first.

This species of admiration might, however, never have passed the limits of a silent homage of appreciation in the soul and heart of the inspired artisan, but for some peculiar circumstances of the case.

Arabella was by nature, and the habits of the brilliant Frenchified atmosphere she had just quitted, a coquette of the first water. She had been accustomed to flattery and splendid courtly appreciation of her varied claims on the admiration of the opposite sex. She had acquired considerable taste and judgment in artistic talent and effect, which were held in high esteem by Charles and his principal nobles. She was so proud of her own and of her father's position in society, that she perhaps thought it impossible any person in Tubal Bromycham's could ever dare to form hopes of a personal nature from any condescension she might exercise towards him. Anxious then, to assure herself of the continued

omnipotence of her charms—weary of lacking the accustomed ambergris fumes of compliment and devotion to their supremacy—discerning something of the extraordinary abilities of Tubal in his art—there can be little doubt that Mistress Holte had amused herself with exciting feelings in the young smith which she never dreamed for a moment of encouraging to any untoward exhibition, much less favourable result.

But, on his part, the warmth and vehemence of Tubal Bromycham's organisation—the simplicity and tenderness of his heart—his ignorance of the deception and unmeaning allurements of coquettish and courtly manners, conspired with his knowledge of his true birth and rights, to persuade him that an honourable attachment on his part, even to the daughter of the haughty Baronet of Aston, was not to be considered altogether a piece of frenzy.

In the lowliest debasement of their fortunes his family had cherished the tradition of their origin, and hopes of the restoration of their ravished inheritance. And now, when on all sides resounded indignant demands for the restitution of invaded rights and privileges, and every species of grievance was clamorous for redress, Tubal was surely justified in believing that a time was also coming when justice might be extorted for his deprived and shamefully cozened race. A Lord of Birmingham might well, then, consider himself no unmeet suitor for a daughter of the parvenu house of Holte of Aston.

The brave smith, conscious of all manly qualities proper to win a woman's love—of devotion, skill, courage, and strength far surpassing other men's—did not form to himself any full notion of the distance placed, by education and manners, between him and a court-bred lady of his times. We fear, indeed, that Arabella must have diverted herself, and the tedious idleness now forced upon her, with kindling and playing with the fire in his breast to a much greater extent than she ever admitted. How else could the extraordinary delusion have arisen in his mind that the youthful beauty returned his affection, and would not disdain to listen to its avowal? Was it sheer madness alone that possessed and drew Tubal Bromycham at last upon the irrevocable utterance?

Whether it was that Arabella Holte perceived now, for the first time, the mischief she had done, and the danger she had incurred, or whether her pride and insolence of supposed superior birth and rank were alone provoked to measures of retaliation, cannot be precisely known; but she made a formal complaint to her father of the presumptuous overtures of the master mechanic he employed in the decoration of his palace, and the scenes to which allusion has been made, followed as a matter of course. Tubal, standing up fiercely for the rights of his manhood, and retaliating on Sir Thomas's insults at his condition, by telling him that a gentleman who had become a blacksmith was at least the equal of a blacksmith who had become a gentleman, was assailed by him, and repulsed the attack in the manner described; Sir Thomas remaining the victor only by force of the superior numbers that thronged to his aid.

Tubal was, however, greatly to blame, and he had always felt so, in

the acquiescence he afterwards lent to the armourer's scheme of marrying him to his daughter.

He had ever, indeed, dearly cherished Dorothy Firebrace, but it was rather as a lovely and lively child, as a younger sister, that he had so far caressed and consorted with her under his friendly master's roof. But the deep soreness of heart left by his cruel and mortifying failure with the proud daughter of Aston Hall; the natural yearnings of the disappointed affections for some new hold, and clinging-to-gratitude to his generous patron; the growing and rapidly-developing beauties of his youthful companion; perhaps some vague hope to inflict, in his turn, mortification and a sense of despised dominion—of a yoke cast off—on his beautiful oppressor—had all conspired to induce Tubal to fall into the plan.

And now, even as he took his lonely way through the night toward Aston Hall, he tried to persuade himself that his objects in going there, and attempting the rescue of his betrothed, were to demonstrate his great and all-venturing affection for *her* to Sir Thomas Holte's scornful daughter; and to Sir Thomas Holte himself, that it was not from any dread of him or of his power he had not hitherto taken effectual steps to revenge the insults and wrongs inflicted on him.

To retain Edward Holte unconditionally in his power, and yet to spare him, seemed also a noble luxury of vengeance Tubal was willing, at every hazard, to preserve to himself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CLIMBING OF ASTON HALL.

TUBAL BROMYCHAM was disquieted with none of the apprehensions which had visited Dorothy in her lonely walk through Aston Park. He feared no man, and scarcely any number of men. He would scarcely have turned aside to avoid the full onset of the ferocious animal, the mere sight of which had so much excited her dread. Nevertheless, aware that his enterprise required secrecy as a condition of success, he avoided all the open lines of approach to the Hall, moving chiefly along hedge sides, under the shadows of the chestnut and elm trees of the great avenue, and finally, the outside of the lofty garden walls on the south, by which Aston is reached from Birmingham.

Tubal, who knew every inch of the mansion and its grounds, knew that in this direction there were conveniences for the operation he meditated possessed by no other. He apprehended observation least on this side, which would be supposed safe from the circumstance that a terrace swept round the entire circuit of the house, excepting on the east front, divided from the park and the fields beyond by a sunken wall and a moat, which, though not very broad, was not easy to be passed without the help of the draw-bridges. These would now, of course, be raised; and if watch and ward were kept at all, Tubal concluded it would be in the great hall on the entrance of the east front.

Nor was he out in his calculation. Darkness and silence seemed to

reign absolutely on the whole extent of the mansion he could discern on his approach, and it was fortunately a very cloudy night, though there was occasionally a burst of moonlight that brought out the broad landscape into sudden relief, and, in particular, into visions of ghostly loveliness the statuary with which Sir Thomas had surrounded his grounds. The funereal-looking yew-trees, cut into all sorts of grotesque representations of animals, and a line of lofty sycamores bordering the moat, further screened the advance. And thus it happened that Tubal, clearing the watery boundary at a leap, easily made his way along the walk to a wall that divided the west from the south front. He scrambled over this, though it was of considerable height, apparently without exciting any attention; and proceeding along the entire length of the west front, suddenly turned into a deep angle which it there forms with the northern division of the elevation.

This west front—as any Birminghamer can ascertain on inspection—consists, and consisted then, of three stories: the ground-floor, comprising a series of apartments surmounted by the one grand chamber called the Long Gallery, over which were a projecting cornice and a parapet, and a flat roof covered with lead, whence a most extensive view of the whole surrounding country was afforded. Behind this lofty promenade arose the third story, furnished with several gable-windows, backed by the tiled and sharp-sloping roofs of the main mass of the central pile. And over these again were several stacks of octagonal chimneys; the whole being surmounted by the tower of the Dome-Chamber, rising conspicuously from the midst.

Marvellous as it may appear, it was Tubal Bromycham's purpose and resolve to reach that Dome-Chamber from the exterior of the mansion, without, of course, any of the usual assistance in the shape of ladders and scaffolding.

In truth, a most daring and, on the face of it, impossible enterprise. But Tubal, whose opportunities had familiarised him with every detail, both external and internal, of the building, had formed his own conclusions on the point. At all events, he was determined to hazard much—life itself perhaps—not improbably liberty—any malicious interpretation that might be put on it—on the audacious project to set his betrothed bride free, without paying the ransom so imperiously demanded.

He remembered that in a corner of the junction between the west and north fronts he had himself placed, and securely riveted, a thick ornamental waterspout from the flat roof to the basement—an iron waterspout, decorated at certain intervals by projecting gargoyles or *spurs* of grotesque ironwork, whence the water was to be discharged from the roof, and the broad projection of the middle cornice or stringcourse, and its carved stonework designs, which ran all along the line of the building, about half-way in the elevation of the lofty walls.

Tubal remembered this, and confiding in the matchless strength of his arms and general muscular power, in his dauntless nerve and coolness, and knowledge of localities, had resolved upon the extraordinary plan of dragging himself up a wall sixty or seventy feet high by means only of this waterspout!

Once arrived on the flat roof of the Great Gallery, he knew there was a way, if he could avoid making any betraying noise, by which he could get into the top chambers of the house and reach the dome. Such further difficulties as he might then encounter in the way of bolt and bar, the skilful smith, who had fashioned them nearly all, came prepared to obviate with the basket of tools strapped on his shoulder. Something, no doubt, must then be confided to luck; and Tubal was willing to abide the hazard of the die. In truth, he placed no great store on the life to be hazarded, in comparison with the objects he had in view.

Having reached the corner of the building he had in view, Tubal paused and listened to ascertain if there was any fear of detective pursuit. As he did so, the distant clock of St. Martin, in Birmingham, struck ten. There was no other sound audible save a faint rustling of the night wind among the neighbouring trees, and the splash and murmur of the moat as it descended by a pretty cascade into a pool at no great distance, contrived to receive the surplus waters.

Satisfied with the silence, Tubal turned to survey the work he had before him. It gave him encouragement to notice how, nearly to the height of the first coping, the walls were covered with a thick ivy, even then of many years' growth. This coping would offer him a resting-place, and was broad enough to furnish a secure stand. The most difficult portion of the task would certainly remain to be performed; but, remembering how often in his early youth he had slung himself up the steep shafts and inclines of mines with only the aid of a loose rope, Tubal felt as if even a perpendicular ascent, with a firm grasp at iron piping, was not so much more difficult. But additional facilities were afforded by the regular jutting of the quoins of the edifice—great stones which formed the strength and ornament of the structure in all its angles and projections and recesses. These he considered, though affording only space for about the points of the feet, almost as good as the steps of a ladder.

Come what would, Tubal Bromycham determined to try the experiment. It might be that he muttered a short prayer, and slightly shuddered when he bethought him how the least awkwardness, the least faltering of resolution, the least failure in his strength, might precipitate him in a few minutes a mangled and bleeding corpse on the gravelled walk on which he stood. But he gave himself little time for reflection on the subject, drew the buckles of his baggy knee-breeches tight, put his cap into his pocket, made sure of the fastening of his basket of tools, set a foot on the first coping-stone, grasped the waterspout in both hands, and with a facility that surprised himself, putting his feet at hazard among the ivy, in a very few minutes accomplished the first part of his perilous adventure. He landed on the coping-stone over the ground-floor chamber of the north-western front of Aston Hall.

It should have been stated that, in consequence of the inequalities of the wall, the waterspout was only closely riveted to it in parts, and therefore afforded openings as holding-places for the climber's strenuous grasp. Tubal, who had himself done the work, knew he could confide in the strength of these rivets. The pipe being also ringed and embossed

with ornamental ironwork, offered numerous stays both to hand and foot. Yet the spectacle of a man, and of a large frame, crawling up the side of a house like a fly, must have been one exceedingly strange and almost incredible even to a beholder. And Tubal himself, looking at what he had done, was amazed; looking at what he had to do, almost felt his bold heart sink in his breast.

He was standing in a niche close beside a projecting carving which resembled a mermaid, being a figure with a woman's head and flowing curls, terminating in a fish-like lower figure, saving that it had griffin's feet at the end. He was at a height of about twenty feet: above him, still to be ascended, was a sheer wall of about twice as many before he could get to the projecting cornice which he must raise himself over to reach the balustrade of the leaden roof. Of course the hazards of a fall increased with the elevation gained; and for a moment Tubal himself desponded as he gazed at the formidable perpendicular still to be surmounted.

A thought which had suggested itself to him previously now recurred. He remembered that the lofty windows that gleamed behind the cornice on which he stood opened into the Great Gallery of Aston Hall. Should he attempt to remove a portion of the mullioned framework, and enter the house that way?

But Tubal also recollected, first, the great strength and intricacy of the iron framework he had himself wrought for these lattices. It would take hours to file a wide enough entrance for a man of his size. The Great Gallery also opened on a landing of the Grand Staircase, which there was reason to suppose would be carefully watched, being the main communication of the mansion from the entrance hall. It was not improbable but that the massive oak doors might be locked on the exterior; and though Tubal came prepared to contend with similar difficulties, he felt that a series of them would exhaust his time, and, very probably, be overheard removing.

Nevertheless, to continue his present enterprise seemed fraught with the greatest danger. To increase his perplexity, Tubal could not, with every effort he made, call to mind whether the top of the waterspout coincided with the platform of the roof, or whether he should have a more perilous interval than all he might have surmounted to clamber without its assistance.

His resolution faltered, certainly, at this idea. But on a sudden it was fully restored by what seemed a very unlikely circumstance. Tubal heard a sound of footsteps and voices below, and glancing downwards perceived a group of persons turning from the west front with torches blazing in their hands. They were mostly, he perceived, serving-men of the house from their livery, pretty well armed with pistols and pikes. But in their haughty and imperiously-striding leader he recognised the man who had treated him with so great indignity, Sir Thomas Holte himself. He was partly in armour, and had a sheathed sword in his hand. And Tubal heard him say as he passed—'Make the rounds thus every hour, while I take me such poor slumber as I may. Richard Grimsorwe returns not; and as I do not doubt these Brummagem rebels have detained him also, let but the Prince send me a force to rescue my

sons, and I will return Armourer Firebrace his truant daughter whipped like a Bridewell wench at a cart-tail !'

Tubal was, however, in part relieved by this speech from an apprehension he entertained that his movements had excited suspicion ; and the indignant feelings which had all along prompted him revived with inspiriting sparkles in his heart at the sight and words of the oppressor. He thought it likely enough aid would be despatched by the King's party that might enable Sir Thomas to gratify his insolent cruelty of disposition without peril to those who were dear to himself. And the idea of the degradation and insult proposed to the young girl whom at least he cherished as a most dear sister, warmed Tubal's generous nature to a furnace-glow of wrath and contrary resolve.

The watch had scarcely, therefore, continued its round out of sight, ere Tubal recommenced his enterprise with renewed determination and energy.

In reality it was not accomplishing much more, up to a certain point, in the open, than what the unhappy little sweep of modern times was once condemned to do in a stifling enclosure. But even the wonderful strength and length of Tubal's arms, the prodigious muscular development of his frame, its shortness in comparison with its width, would not altogether have sufficed, unbacked by the utter insensibility to physical danger that marked his character, and his youthful experience in the coalpits, altogether destitute in those times of the ingenious facilities for entering and leaving invented by modern science and humanity. Yet so cool was his head, so firm his nerve and step, that in point of fact he only stumbled once in accomplishing what remained of that prodigious ascent, which it would terrify most persons but to dream they had attempted. To be sure that was very near the summit ; and even the powerful hands and wrists of the Birmingham smith sustained a fearful wrench as he hung for a moment with the whole weight of his body over a fearful abyss of sixty perpendicular feet. But he speedily regained his footing on the jut of the wall, and shutting his eyes and resolutely proceeding, on a sudden felt his head strike against the projecting eaves of the topmost coping.

To Tubal's horror, however, he perceived, immediately on opening his eyes, that one of his worst anticipations was well founded. The waterspout projected in a curious, buffalo-head shaped gargoyle just over his head, but only mounted to a level with the leads of the aerial terrace above. After that there was a stone balustrade, ornamented at intervals with urn-like vases. Consequently there was a necessity of clambering to the top of the waterspout without any species of hold or support ; and it must be allowed that even the strong brain of Tubal Bromycham whirled for a moment, and his stout heart quivered like an affrighted woman's in his massive breast, as the conviction forced itself upon his mind. The sweat burst in large globules on his heated brows, his eyes dilated to double their proper size, as he glared down the frightful depth he had ascended. But he felt in the glance that, spent as his strength now was, there would even be more danger to attempt retrieving a footing on the ground below than to persevere in his present desperate effort. In Tubal's veins there flowed the purest streams of

that energetic, unwearied, unconquerable Anglo-Saxon blood which, building, as it were, sand by sand, has raised a mightier empire than the world ever before beheld, with an insignificant island of the Atlantic for the keystone of the fabric. Tubal recommended his soul in one brief ejaculation to his God, and seizing the top of the waterspout in the strenuous clutch, one might almost say, of despair, set his feet resolutely nearly close to his hands, and slung himself by a single powerful movement upright on the open top. A sudden giddiness then assailed him, and but for an instinctive effort whereby he threw himself over the balustrade on the leads, he must have fallen the other way, and been dashed to pieces below.

A faintness and momentary forgetfulness doubtless then came over even the strong smith. But he revived after that brief unconsciousness, and springing on his feet, found himself safe and sound under a bright beam of moonlight that, piercing a mass of driving clouds, covered the wide expanse now beneath his gaze with a shadowy imitation of the glories of the day.

The artist soul of Tubal, it may well be, was visited by a sense of soothing and satisfaction in the tranquil beauty of the spectacle thus illumined into view, as when a mother lifts the coverlets from the rosy limbs of the sleeping child. But he was aware he had no time to lose from the practical business of his enterprise, thus far almost miraculously accomplished. And finding himself, as he expected, with his back to the window of one of the three gable summits of the main central building on the west, he brought his tool-basket round (which, by-the-by, had hung rather heavily more than once on his neck in the ascent), and selecting a file and pincers from the contents, proceeded at once to remove the framework of a large square of lozenge panes.

Familiar with every portion of the building, Tubal was aware that these windows admitted light into an immense and otherwise totally dark garret chamber or loft, intended by the builder as a store and lumber room for the use of the great household that was to be accommodated under the roofs. This has since been partially divided off into small dormitories for servants; but at that time there were only the obstacles of two strong doors at either hand to hinder the success of a manœuvre necessary to the completion of Tubal's plans.

Of course he was aware that it was out of the question, even for himself alone, to think of returning by the way he came; worn and fatigued almost to powerlessness as he felt in his general frame, as well as in his strained hands and arms. But he knew that at one end of this vast store-room there was a door, locked on the exterior it is true, but communicating by a narrow servants' staircase with the kitchen and other house offices on the basement of the north-west tower, and whence another door at the foot, usually only bolted on the interior, allowed exit to the Terrace Walk. And that at the opposite end of the store room there was a door-secured within, that opened on the top landing of the Grand Staircase, and consequently close upon the Dome-Chamber.

Tubal's present business was therefore to obtain an entry into the store-room, and under his skilful labour the fastenings of the window

speedily gave way, and allowed him the requisite facility. He thrust himself feet foremost then into the dismal loft, and the moon being now again thickly obscured, had to grope his passage amidst firkins and sacks, and lines of bacon-hooks, and hams, and hog-sheads of various stores, to the door by which he purposed to proceed on his enterprise.

Arriving at the point after several stumbles and severe raspings of the shins against obstacles, Tubal was nevertheless destined to be surprised by finding one removed. The store-room door was unbolted and ajar.

Rather alarmed than pleased with this facility, Tubal did not hesitate on his way, but opening the door widely, stepped on.

He was now on the top landing-place of the Grand Staircase, and though uncomfortably struck by the circumstance mentioned above, after listening for a moment and hearing no sound below, he turned to ascend the narrow flight of steps leading to the Dome-Chamber. But there on a sudden he was struck by a most unwelcome spectacle.

Seated, reclining with his back against the door of that strong and lofty prison chamber was a man, apparently on guard. But very remissly so, for his eyes were closed, and he was snoring with a noise as if he was rather drawing in water than air, and suffocating accordingly with his mouth gaping wide open. He had, however, a long bare knife strongly clenched in his hand, and by the glare emitted from an opening in a dark lantern beside him, Tubal Bromycham recognised, after a moment's attention, Adam Blackjack, the principal cook at Aston Hall.

The sight amazed him. Could this man be placed there on the guard to prevent the escape of a young girl from a strong-barred chamber at such an elevation? Was Adam Blackjack a likely man for the office?

Tubal, as well as Dorothy Firebrace, was aware that the Aston cook had of latter times made a somewhat noticeable adhesion to an obscure but dreaded and defamed sect in Birmingham, and might therefore be supposed to stand in some disfavour with his orthodox master. He was not, at all events, a probable person to be chosen for the office of jailer or watchman on such an occasion. But otherwise, how to account for his presence there?

Tubal considered that it would be a considerable saving of labour if Adam was possessed of the key of the Dome-Chamber, and he could take it from him. Of this latter he had no doubt; his only apprehension lay in the chance of resistance provoking a struggle, which might be overheard. Still it was plain the hazard must be run; and forming his plan at a glance, Tubal mounted the intervening steps on tiptoe, seized the hand that held the knife in one vice-like clench, and with his other grasped and compressed the cook's yawning mouth. The yell he would have given in his first alarm was thus prevented, and Adam Blackjack glared wide awake, to find himself completely in the power of his adversary.

'Peace! Do you know me? On your life utter no sound; you are in my hands for life or death! What do you here, man?' said Tubal, in a low-breathed but stern and commanding utterance.

'Tubal Bromycham !' ejaculated the cook, relinquishing his knife, and thrusting the hand from his mouth. 'Or is it a trick of the foul one? Aroint you, fiend, if ye be Sir Thomas Holte under this form !'

'I am even what I seem, man ; but again, what do you here ? Are you appointed the fair prisoner's keeper ?' said Tubal, more astonished at the wild and terrified look the master-cook cast at him than he could have been by any violence of defence.

'Yea, but not in the sort you deem. Yea, I am appointed Dorothy Firebrace's keeper ! Young Maud's ghost, that has often haunted me on other occasions, appeared to me by my kitchen fire, all wet and streaming as they raised her from the Swan Pools down in the Pleasaunce, and bade me ascend even where you find me, and resist unto the death in case her betrayer and lustful master in the flesh meditated any wrong to her in the matters of her honour and chastity. But are you of Birmingham, then, in possession of the house ?'

'You have not the key, then, Adam ?' said Tubal, eluding the question, and much perplexed by what he heard, but forming some not unlikely notion that the man's senses were disordered.

'No, smith ; Sir Thomas hath—he alone !' replied Adam, adding eagerly, 'But if you come to redeem the poor stray lamb from the butchers, some slight of your mystery, Master Bromycham, will as easily do the turn.'

'So it may, if I can calculate on your helpfulness, Adam. Will you hold me your lamp ?—resting assured that, on your least movement to thwart me, I plunge this knife with all the strength of my arm under your fifth rib !' said Tubal.

'Ay will he, joyfully,' returned Adam, 'for the young woman's presence and peril among us has so stirred up all the mire of old deeds in my soul, that I know not well what I think, or say, or do. Let us be quit of her at any price. I did think even to go to the witch who curses this proud house of sin hereabouts, at fitting intervals, to beg her aid in the work.'

'If it be so, I shall need none but yours, good Adam,' responded Tubal, frankly restoring the Anabaptist his light ; and, swinging his basket round from his shoulders, he took from it a ring of short hooked irons—skeleton keys, in point of fact—to fit the wards he had designed and modelled in the numerous ingenious locks of Aston Hall ; for Tubal Bromycham was a smith at all modern divisions of the work.

'The devil's claws, the devil's claws,' muttered Adam Blackjack, ruminating and stroking these instruments. 'How they do stretch out and hook men down to flames and brimstone ! But you need light, Master Tubal. So do we all. What a plain text it is—"I am the light that shineth in darkness." Men's souls, like mine, are a darkness, verily ! What light, though ? From whose lantern shall we take it ? I would there were a light like the sun's for men's minds as well as our bodies, for I am so exercised with torments groping for it, that whiles it seems to me much preferable to be all darkness, as I was in my days of unquickenings. And, indeed, it appears to me often as if I should burst mine eyeballs yet, looking vainly through the mirk.'

‘Be silent,’ said Tubal, at this juncture, relinquishing his first intention of proceeding at once to pick the lock. ‘We shall frighten her. I must speak to her first, to give notice we are friends that are at hand.’

‘Nay, for she is already in some sweet rest, under the assurance of my vigilance in her behalf. So I told her through the keyhole; and she hath left off weeping and sobbing for a good time, since I myself have plainly been asleep,’ said Adam, not appearing to find anything contrary in his assertion.

Tubal nodded, once more applied his potent instrument, and with a mixture of dexterity and strength which probably surpassed in effect the handling of the proper key in other hands, almost immediately forced back the massive wards of the Dome-Chamber lock.

It was plain the effort was not even overheard within; and, drawing the door of the prison room softly back, Tubal perceived, by Adam Blackjack’s lantern, which he carefully shaded in the glare, Dorothy Firebrace lying tranquilly asleep on a truss of straw.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FLIGHT.

SUCH was the provision Sir Thomas had caused to be made, under his own eye, for his captive’s sleeping accommodation. Creature comforts were a little better attended to; not by the prisoner herself, however. A platter of game pasty remained apparently untasted; a flagon of beer the same; only a can of water appeared to Adam Blackjack’s scrutiny diminished.

‘Poor soul! Yet I took care she had a whole partridge to her slice,’ said Adam, compassionately surveying the beautiful slumberer. ‘But, oh, when I think of the cruelties and threats I did exercise by my master’s orders against the unhappy girl Maud, to compel her to marry *me*, and so shelter *him* from the evil report due to his villainies, what can I ever do to lighten my soul of the burden? And to think when the poor girl fled with her child in her arms from her confinement under my cruel charge at Sutton Manor House, and was so flung away by Sir Thomas, and accursed by her hag-mother, that she must needs take refuge from us all in the deep, black, slimy pool among the eels! Where is the redemption that can cleanse so black a murderer’s breast as mine? Baptism unto a new life, they say; a baptism of blood, Come-What-Will Faithful Moggs will have it! But, if so, whose blood? What blood? Where?’

‘Help me to save this dear child; it shall count more than beads in your behalf, Adam,’ said Tubal, now convinced that he might place trust in his unexpected ally.

‘Beads! I scorn the Popish mummary!’ exclaimed Adam, and in so loud a tone that he startled the sleeper awake, ere Tubal could interpose.

‘Good heavens! where am I? What is this? Be ye murderers?’

exclaimed Dorothy, rising with an affrighted stare from her coarse couch, on which she lay in her clothes.

'Do you not know me, Dorothy?' said Tubal, in a soothing tone, but which yet seemed to strike the armourer's daughter with some vague sense of dismay.

'Tubal!' she exclaimed, 'Tubal Bromycham! But you must not reproach me, Tubal. It was to my father's and the whole town's disgrace to so maltreat a guest and merchandiser. And I have heard things of you, Tubal, since I have been at Aston, that should make you as much—a good deal more—ashamed!' she concluded, evidently not having had time to retrieve her disordered faculties, or seeking, naturally enough, apologies for her own in the conduct of her betrothed.

Tubal's excited countenance grew pale. But his was not a nature good at feigning in any guise.

'Let us not reproach each other, Dorothy,' he said, sadly. 'You also have passed, and at once, under the Holte sorcery; but be content. The ill you know of me, as you think, sets you for ever free from a betrothal which I have often deemed was the first pressure of a yoke you would never have borne to put your neck wholly into. I come now to redeem you from your captivity only as a friend, as a brother! But there is no moment of time to be lost.'

'It is true, then, you love the haughty daughter of this house, whose very glance seems as it would spurn princes?' returned Dorothy, with almost an expression of scorn, and it is very possible her feeling as a woman and rival beauty were somewhat painfully aroused, for she added the irretrievable words, 'A high-born lady, for whose sake you have uncomplainingly endured vile shames and indignities, such as they do report to me about Aston?'

'Merciless words, but true,' groaned Tubal. 'Yet it is not for my sake—it is for your father's—for this Edward Holte's sake even, if it so please you. I pray you to follow me at once, and escape from this den of proud and masterful vengeance and oppression.'

'For *Edward Holte's* sake!' repeated Dorothy, perhaps rather shocked herself at this plain apprehension of her inward feeling. 'How do I know but that you desire merely to redeem the only hostage of his safety, from his father's hands, in my person? Why are you here? How? Is there an exchange of prisoners between the town and Aston?'

'No, nor will be,' returned Tubal, passionately. 'Sir Thomas has sent for aid from the King's nephew; which when he receives—if he retains you as the pledge for his son's safety—he will immediately attack and destroy your native town, and bring your father to some harmful doom!'

Dorothy briefly considered how probable all this was, and of the everlasting feud that would thence arise between her father's town and Aston Hall. Tubal followed up the argument by a rapid statement of the threats he had heard fall from Sir Thomas Holte against her personally, reminded her of his hard and implacable nature, and declared to her the agonising grief of her father, until she was nigh overcome. But the condition she nevertheless affixed to her compliance powerfully struck Tubal, and dwelt ever after on his memory. 'Swear to me,' she

said, 'that you take Edward Holte under your safeguard, if I leave his sire's custody thus ! I can trust you, Tubal, but no other of those who are sedition-stirrers now in Birmingham !'

Strange, too, and momentous in its revelation, was Tubal Bromycham's reply :

'I swear to you so, Dorothy, by my *love for Arabella Holte*—by my hope to retrieve, as a knight and noble, that place in her affection which she has disdained to allot to the mechanic artisan ! Come, come away !'

Aided by Adam Blackjack, who had the keys of the great store-loft, escape thenceforth was easy enough. The fugitives had but to cross that, to descend a long spiral staircase, to draw the inner bolts of a massive arched door, when they emerged on the circling terrace of Aston Hall, and, after exchanging a few words of parting good-will with the master-cook, betook themselves to a rapid and unmolested return over the Park to Birmingham.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORNING DEVOTIONS AT ASTON HALL.

IT was early morning at Aston Hall. A bright sun shone over wood and glade, green-swelling upland and broad-sloping vale ; the purple-heathered wastes of Sutton Chase, thickly scattered with trees that became a forest on the skirts, sent a bright sweet-breathed breeze to the stately mansion gates ; the deer sprung from their dewy coverts, and bounded in frolicsome troops to the open wilds, as if inviting the hunter's eager pursuit—when the numerous household of Sir Thomas Holte, aroused at the customary daybreak hour, and having completed the first tasks of the day, assembled, according to wont, in the Hall Chapel. And there the haughty master of the mansion himself, escorting his lady and daughter, and treated on all sides with a ceremonial deference that would scarcely now be paid to a prince, deigned to present himself, cloaked, hat in hand, with trimmed beard and locks, to share the religious exercise considered in those times the due commencement of a Christian gentleman's day.

But it is doubtful whether Sir Thomas would have preserved the proper patience and humility for the task, had he known from the first what tidings were in store for him.

Indeed, the fact of the case, as regarded this, appeared but too plainly when, in the midst of the meek chaplain's (Mr. Lane's) brief exhortation after the morning prayer, a poor-looking fellow made his way into the loftily-lighted and stately apartment dedicated as a chapel at Aston Hall, and timorously crouching and cringing at every step, asked for his worship Sir Thomas Holte. Adam Blackjack, who was sitting with the other domestics on one of a range of wooden benches, in the rear of the chapel, but with closed eyes, and with a soured, disgusted expression, almost as if he was partaking, against his will, of some bitter medicine, glared, startled at once, at the inquirer, and recognised him

instantly as Simon Fairservice, ostler at the Black Boy, in Birmingham. He then shook his head, as if to reprehend the intrusion, and rigidly closed his eyes again; but Sir Thomas Holte, observing what took place from a high damask-curtained pew, where he usually sat apart from the vulgar throng of worshippers, arose and beckoned to the stranger to approach.

'You come from Birmingham, fellow, doubtless?' he exclaimed, indecorously interrupting the chaplain's gently-murmured utterance. 'Bring you me tidings from the sedition-mongers there, or from Master Grimsorwe, whom I sent last night with a message to them, from which he has not returned?—only my coach and horses, that for some cause they did not think fit to steal, after a tedious tarriance at the unlawful barriers raised to bar entrance into the town.'

Sir Thomas, be it remarked, never mentioned Richard Grimsorwe in any personal relationship to himself in the presence of Lady Holte. But the pale lady herself grew paler yet upon the words. 'Come you from my son, Master Edward Holte, good fellow?' she also eagerly exclaimed.

Simon, who stuttered exceedingly in his speech, and was, besides, alarmed at the stately presence in which he found himself, said something quite unintelligible in reply, bowing to his shoe leathers. But he presented a piece of paper, folded in the form of a letter, which was probably much more intelligible. Snatching it, breaking the seal, and perusing the contents, the Master of Aston Hall broke into a torrent of exclamations of wonder and rage.

There was reason, certainly, for both emotions.

The letter was from Richard Grimsorwe, indeed, and commenced by upbraiding his sire, in guarded but sufficiently wounding terms, for his forgetfulness of his promises to keep the armourer's daughter securely as a hostage at Aston, for the safety of his brother and himself from the exasperation of the townsfolk. The damsel, he stated, it was universally known in Birmingham, had returned to her father's house, under escort of her betrothed, the insolent smith, Tubal Bromycham, who boasted that he had set her free without an attempt of let or hindrance at Aston Hall!

Sir Thomas read only thus far, when, yelling out that the thing could not be so, that it was an utter impossibility, he snatched up a ponderous key, which he had laid on the velvet cushion before him at his prayers, and strode out of the chapel, followed by several of his domestics; perhaps more curious to ascertain the truth of the strange intelligence than in the expectation of being of assistance.

Among these was Adam Blackjack, with a smile of sinister and occult significance gleaming over his sardonic visage. The messenger also conceived he had some right to attend, though with evident dismay and distance, as if he feared some likelihood of sharing the punishment of the announced want of vigilance at the Hall.

On arriving at the Dome-Chamber, Sir Thomas, however, found some reason to hope still that all was well. The door was as securely fastened as he had left it. Adam Blackjack had, indeed, made it his particular and rather singular request to Tubal that he would return the

bolt to its proper place when Dorothy's escape was effected. But the moment Sir Thomas put in his key and had opened the door, the true state of things appeared in the complete emptiness of the lofty dungeon !

It may be imagined how this discovery affected the choleric lord of Aston Hall. No one dared to speak to him for some time while his fury vented itself. Yet even in him this passion was somewhat modified by the astonishment that took possession of him as he contemplated the void. 'But, my good heavens ! how has all this come to pass ? There must be connivance—treason among ye, rogues !' he yelled to the affrighted and shrinking servants.

Adam Blackjack, the only guilty one, alone remained firm and unmoved.

'Tis much like *witchcraft*, worshipful sir,' he said, with a smile whose bitter causticity he could not quite suppress. 'There *is* a witch, you wot well, who is the sworn enemy of you and of all of us under your roof ; and it is full time your worship saw better into it, for none other but a witch could have opened these doors and closed them again, unheard and unseen, or had the malice to work you and your honourable sons so great damage as setting the fair wench loose must needs be at this time.'

'The witch, Maud Grimsorwe ? Villain, I see thou dost flout at me ! Would she so have imperilled her own grandson as to do this mischief to me, however much she might desire *that* ? 'Tis far likelier thy gloomy black-blooded self has conspired against thy master and feeder ; which, if I should but once discover——'

'Ay, what then, what then, Sir Thomas, my *master and feeder* ?' returned Adam, with a sudden fierceness and challenge in his manner that arrested Sir Thomas's angry speech, partly with astonishment. And it was strange the effect produced by the bold, almost the defying, tone of the master-cook to his angry lord.

'Why, then,' the baronet only answered, in a much softened and retracting accent, 'why, then, man, I would but strip my apron from thy forelegs, and send thee to cant and snuffle psalms with thy friends, the Anabaptists, in Birmingham, on much shorter commons than ever you fared in my house.'

'I shall find listeners there, then, Sir Thomas, to many a curious tale !' the cook replied, still in very gloomy and menacing accents. 'But the hour of my deliverance,' he continued in muttering undertones, as to himself, 'has not yet sounded ! Or can it be that the fleshpots of Egypt detain me from heavenly manna in the wilderness ? Oh ! if I could but shake off at once, and at this moment, the spell of the witch, and of the apparition, and of her blue-skinned son, who some say was born while his mother was a-drowning ! If she was burned, now, perhaps the apparition would cease ; and then, what power would the man Grimsorwe have to rule my will to so much worse wickedness, I say ? You ask why the witch should do you the harm we see, Sir Thomas ?' the mind-unhinged fanatic continued, with a sudden start of recollection. 'Out upon it ! can she not save her grandson by some impery, and leave your heir only in the hands of your enemies ?'

Sir Thomas eagerly returned to his letter upon this, and exhibited so

much complaisance to the strange fancies of his cook as to read aloud to him what followed.

Richard Grimsorwe went on to complain that he himself had fallen into still worse and more implacable hands than his beloved brother—into those of a direct agent and officer of the usurping Parliament; charged with treason against the State, for no other reason than that he had made application to the lawful authorities of the town to effect that brother's release. That he was in momentary apprehension of being sent a prisoner to London—debarred all sight and speech with the object of their affectionate interest, and under close surveillance at the agent in question's head-quarters. That a forcible rescue was meanwhile more than ever out of the question, unless by a powerful force, the whole town being under arms, and in a state of open rebellion, under the leadership of Armourer Firebrace and Tubal Bromycham; nay, of men much wilder and more ungovernable in their notions, who appeared to project the overthrow of every form of lawful authority. Already the propriety was openly discussed of seizing upon the Moat House, and expelling the Crown-Bailiff. A noted fanatic preacher had full possession of the ear of the populace, and urged upon them the necessity of turning the regular clergyman of Birmingham out of his benefice, and having himself exalted in the place. And to complete the wild and ruinous disorder of men's minds and events, Richard Grimsorwe concluded with the two most exasperating revelations he could contrive: on the one hand, the audacious smith, Tubal Bromycham, declared himself the *lawful heir and representative* of the ancient lords of Birmingham; while on the other, a portion of the lowest populace openly avowed their wish and resolution to level all ranks and degrees to their own.

Grimsorwe well knew nothing could be more annoying to his father than the bare notion of a pretendant to the stately territorial title he projected for himself, with a grant of the Crown rights in Birmingham, as a reward for the services he purposed rendering. It was Sir Thomas Holte's frequently avowed purpose to die Earl of his neighbouring town. But that the rival to his high titular hopes should be the hated Tubal would, Grimsorwe believed and purposed, inflame his indignation beyond all the restraints of prudence.

The necessity of the traitor's deeper plans, however, required that he should mention that certain of the Parliament forces were immediately assembling for the defence of Birmingham. And this partly enforced upon Sir Thomas Holte a degree of patience and forbearance he might not otherwise have exhibited.

'It were madness—nothing but certain defeat and disgrace even,' he muttered, 'to march upon the prepared town with my unarmed rascallions! What must be done? what must be done? I must abide the Prince's answer. Meanwhile, honest fellow,' he said to the Black Boy ostler, who was looking on with knees crooked with meanness and fear, 'my son recommends you, on safe delivery of this letter, to a silver crown from my pocket. Here it is. Return as quietly as you came, and let them not know in Gath of our grief and desolation until we can better show our resentment of the same.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRINCE RUPERT.

THE haughty Lord of Aston was thus compelled to await, in a state of the most fretful and exasperated anxiety and alarm, the result of his entreaty for aid to the King's commanders in the neighbouring county of Worcester.

And not only had he now the greatest reason to be apprehensive for the safety of his two sons in the hands of excited enemies, reports of whose strange and wild proceedings in their outbreak grew hourly in those qualities, until the inhabitants of Aston Hall almost passed into the belief that the townsmen of Birmingham were literally, and in all the forms, *gone mad*. Conscious of his imprudence in betraying before Dorothy Firebrace the King's dangerous condition in his quarters, Sir Thomas was, besides, tormented with the reflection that perhaps some harmful use might be made of the divulging. And yet he could not bring himself to disclose how unfit he was for trust, by sending Charles warning of what he had done.

All his hope remained in the influence in the King's favour he could not but conceive his son, Edward Holte, must have with the armourer's daughter. Yet, on the other hand, might not his own unhandsome conduct towards her have destroyed that? The possibility of speedy aid from Worcestershire remained the only consolation.

Sir Thomas counted the hours and the moments necessary to elapse before he could receive a reply to his demands for aid. He could confide, he well knew, in the speed and goodwill of his messenger, Robin Falconer. But difficulties might well intervene. The Marquis of Hertford, and other great western lords, had, indeed, under cover and support of the Royalist cavalry detached to their aid, raised very considerable forces in the counties where their interest chiefly lay. But, like most of the King's levies at the time, these were ill-provided with arms, and scarcely under any kind of martial discipline. The Parliament had, moreover, opposed a small but well-appointed army to these volunteers, under the Earl of Bedford, on whose advance there were very general reports; the marquis and his principal gathering were retiring rapidly upon the borders of Wales. The only chance was, therefore, that the King's horse might still remain in some position, covering the retreat, to allow of a portion being despatched to suppress the new and menacing outbreak in the midland.

Sir Thomas counted the hours; and not a few were necessary, even in the quietest times, to traverse the distance between Birmingham and Worcester. The extreme badness, hilly and devious character of the roads to be traversed, rather than the actual distance, made its five and thirty miles a many hours' journey, at the best speed of man and horse. But there was also to be taken into calculation the possibility of enemies being encountered, or avoided by long detours, and Sir Thomas could only hope to see his servant sent on the business again, about the end of the second day of his mission.

It was the third, however, before Robin Falconer returned, and then

on a lamed and all but exhausted steed. At another time, a severe rating would have awaited the domestic who had brought home a horse in such a condition ; but Sir Thomas was too eager to learn results to concern himself about means. 'What news, what news, Robin Falconer?' he exclaimed, as the man threw himself from his bespattered and sweating beast. 'Good or bad? Speak it in a word, for my heart is sick with expectation.'

'Here is a letter, your worship, from the Prince's Highness own hand!' panted Robin, producing a large folded parchment like a piece of paper from his doublet. 'It will speak better than—I—can. My breath is gone with mere haste!'

Sir Thomas eagerly snatched the document.

It was directed, in a large coarse scrawl, 'To the worthy Knight Baronet, Sir Thomas Halte, at his house at *Achtan*, nigh *Bromacham*!' And the curious mis-spelling of the words, in the first place, attracted some frowning attention on his part. Robin Falconer hastened to explain. 'Twas writ on a drum-head, sir, with a gauntleted hand that had been laying about it, but some half-hour before, on rebels' costards (head-pieces), till the sword it held was like a bloody flail; and his Highness speaks English but foreignly, much more writes it; and I had no horn-book skill to help him at the work.'

'Truly,' said Sir Thomas, brightening up wonderfully, 'if this be from the Prince's own hand, I marvel not, for though his Highness's mother was an English princess, his father, the Palatine King of Bohemia, was a German; and 'tis a great honour he doth me to indite to me with his own hand. Truly, a royal seal!' the aristocratic baronet concluded, turning the letter over, and surveying, with great satisfaction, the enormous piece of wax, deeply impressed with a magnificent coat of arms, the supporters being the lion and unicorn of England. These were surmounted by two crowns, which attested Prince Rupert's descent on both sides from kings; though one was but that luckless pretender to the rank, the Palatine Frederick, who lost his own comfortable principedom in the attempt to achieve the exaltation.

Sir Thomas's anxious features changed in expression to one of swelling importance and pompous self-appreciation as, after a deliberate survey of this royal attestation, he desired a page, who happened at the moment to be crossing the space before the porch, to bring him his lady's silver scissors. 'We must not break and mar so picture-like a piece of die-work,' he said; and in spite of the momentous nature of the contents he had cause to expect, the builder of Aston Hall forbore to tamper with the stately 'closure until he had received the instrument by which the letter could be opened without spoiling the seal. Nor was he much surprised, in the anxious state of mind among the relatives of Edward Holte, to find that his daughter Arabella brought the scissors. But even Arabella did not venture to hand them to him without a deep curtsey; and then stood silently by, expecting what explanation might be deigned.

Sir Thomas read the document at first to himself; but the bright eyes fixed upon him easily discerned that the emotions roused by the perusal were of a proudly excited order. 'And God be praised!' exclaimed Sir

Thomas, at the conclusion, with a burst of triumphant satisfaction. 'The Prince's Highness advertises me that he will be at Aston Hall himself—even he HIMSELF—at the head of a strong party of horse, as fast on the heels of my messenger as any commodity of his business near Worcester will permit! This very night, perchance! But read our royal captain's words yourself, Arabella, and report to your mother the certain high deliverance of her son. Aloud, aloud!'

Miss Holte as eagerly complied with the impatient old man's order, and read as follows:

'GOOD SIR THOMAS HOLTE,

'Your message has reached me, and sets my blood a-churning at the account of the singular injuries and insults offered to his Majesty's greatness and authority in the town you mention. The dangers and commodities of the place, for all martial uses and the service of his Majesty, I do also plainly perceive—as well by your averrings as the witnessing of the noblemen and officers of these western parts who are with me here. I have drawn the first blood in these wars, and given the enemy's cavalry a check and overthrow, which sets me free for operations wherever it may most concern his Majesty's service I should be. Meseems there is nothing more germane to that matter than to punish the rebellious artisans of your town, and restore them, with a bloody and swift punishment, to true obedience. And so important do I deem the office, that I will lead the score or two troopers I deem sufficient, on your report, for the purpose. Look to see me as as early as I can be assured my Lord Hertford is in some safe shelter with the King's new levies, which I expect every hour. Resting your friend,

'RUPERT.'

A species of postscript was added:

'Nota—the *good villain* you sent me did special service in the affray, and should receive some recompense at so loyal a master's hands. He will tell you what things chanced, and how.'

'A gallant—a true soldier's letter!' exclaimed Arabella, with vivid admiration and delight in her looks. 'Such a prince as this will stand upon no parleying and shilley-shalleying with those insolent smiths! I reckon my brother already restored to us. But his Highness speaks of some action lately ensued, Robin Falconer. Were you in view of it? What fell out, good fellow? Tell my father, prithee, if he gives you leave.'

'Speak, Robin,' conjoined Sir Thomas.

Robin Falconer, who was looking rather puzzled to hear himself styled 'a good villain,' blushed up to the eyes upon the question, and hesitated a good deal at first in his reply.

'It was but my chance, an't please you, young madam,' he said. 'Any other would have taken it, and done better on't, no doubt; though the Prince's Highness is pleased to make some special mention of my part; and his Highness hath seen the wars abroad, which we in England have not, I have heard my grandfather say, since the grand Armada and the Spanish Inquisitors, with their thumbscrews and racks,

were wrecked and riven from our shores. And so, faith, then, lady-mistress, I scarce knew it was a battle I was in until it was all over and done! But this was how it happened to me, if your honours please to hear it told.

'Going on your worship's errand,' Robin continued, on the impatient gesture of assent he received, 'you may believe Rouge-Dragon and I let no grass grow beneath our feet; neither had we much other let or hindrance on the way, save the steepness of the hills and rottenness of the roads, where choice could not be made by reason of its being night, until about daybreak, when we topped the Lickey; and so on, at a mended pace, down upon Upton Warren, where the rabbits be in such plenty, you trample as much fur as grass and furze over the waste. By Droitwich Salt Pits, however, the mettle in us had a little wearied, and I was forced, much against my mind, to give poor Rouge-Dragon a taste or two of whip and spur; but when we came upon Handlip Hill he was about dead beaten, and had slipped a shoe, so I was fain to stop for a bait at Astwood village and look for a farrier, which lost me a couple of the hours I had gained. But "The more haste the less speed" is an old proverb, your honour; and it turned out lucky after all, for Rouge-Dragon and I could never have done what we did but for the rest and inner comforting we took there. And Rouge-Dragon, my lady-mistress, drinks all manner of drinks as pleasantly as any Christian that ever bestrode him, and I must say we made little of a couple of gallons of perry between us at Astwood. But he had his oats, and I had my bread and cheese—which are both dry meats—to wash down.'

'Prithee, less of thy horse and thyself, and more of the Prince and the battle,' interrupted Miss Holte; but her sire overruled. 'Let him tell his story his own way, Arabella; there are none shorter with this manner of men,' Sir Thomas replied. 'Go on, Robin, or let it be supposed thy horse has munched his bread and cheese, and thou thy oats.'

'Nay, sir, 'twas the other way,' Robin resumed, but evidently considerably thrown out of his track. 'Still, it's all one, as your honour says, in respect of the Prince and the battle. I am coming to them as fast as I can; but it was needful to show why it was past high noonday when Rouge-Dragon and I came in sight of Rainbon Hill, just over Worcester town, with the London Road from Evesham full in sight over Warndon Waste, when what should we come upon, all of a sudden, but the prettiest sight, sure, that eyes can see—had it been put on our side of the question, your worship. A whole little army of horse and foot, with banners displayed, marching as close and compact, with all its pikes bristling and sparkling in the sun, as the back of the *porcupine* they had at Brummagem Fair, last that ever was, from the *Injees*. And a great company of horse hanging on it as neat as fringe on a hammer-cloth, with others thrown out far in front and rear, on watch and ward over the main body.

'By all which signs I misdoubted in my own mind at once what cropeared knaves they were; for all who have seen the London rebels say they move as slow and steady as a tortoise, while our jolly fellows go a-fighting as loose and gaily at their ease as to a football match. And

so'ry enough was I to see that, at the rate they and I were going at, they would speedily be in possession of all the ways and entrances into the town before me. And to make matters worse—though I had heard everywhere that the King's horse was for certain in Worcester—no manner of suspicion or look-out seemed to be entertained on their part. And I made sure that nothing was likelier than that the Parliament men had stolen a march or two upon ours, and would be pell-mell among them at unawares, with the river behind to hamper escape. Whereupon I made up my mind at once what I would do.'

'My good fellow, what didst thou?' Sir Thomas eagerly interrupted: 'I'll warrant, study rather our friends' safety than thy own!'

'I told Rouge-Dragon how the case stood, and that we must gain Rainbow Hill before those villanous rebels, upon which he gave a snort and a shrill-out; but as I live by bread, and your honour's too, never needed touch of spur or switch our whole gallop over the waste! And he was not much to blame if the noise he so made attracted our enemies' attention on the further side; he meant well, poor lad, and as much as to say, "Trust me for a winner!" But so it befel, and I could espy that the Londoners' cavalry took the alarm at once, and were thrown instantly forward with a score or so of troopers on the swiftest horses to cut off my advance. For your honour sees I was going down a line from the north-west and they coming at a cross upon it from due sou'-west to Rainbow Hill, and I had the longer stretch to get over. And didn't we do it a gallant pace, neither, since we won the race by a good five minutes, and dashed into the town time enough for trumpets to sound, and the Prince to gather a small number of his troopers together! At whose head he did nevertheless, without a moment's pause or delay, suddenly rush out of the town and fall upon the Round-heads just as they were coming to a halt, and steadying themselves for the arrival of their infantry, on the slope of the hill. Marry, I rode in their company; but not so much for bravery as lack of good sense and guidance, for I had no weapon till I possessed myself of one of the enemy's carbines, and fell a' braining with that! But it was the noble Prince himself killed their commander—one Colonel Sandys—with his own hand and sword, fairly beating him from his horse by fine force! Then the rest turned tail and galloped in full rout back upon their main body, and we had the hewing and hacking of them at pleasure for upwards of a mile, and put the rogues on foot into such-like consternation and dismay that they drew away back again to such a distance that his Highness himself, wearied of the pursuit, bade us all return. But Rouge-Dragon and I found ourselves then so spent that we were forced to rest a night upon it, or die.'

'Aha! aha! but this is good news indeed, and puts to rights the silly story out of Birmingham concerning the standard at Nottingham,' exclaimed Sir Thomas gleefully. 'Marry, this is the sort of leader and man for the times! A few turns of Prince Rupert, and the villains will be all on their knees, with ropes round their necks. And to think that it should be his Majesty's royal nephew who is the first to tap the bad blood of the state! But who hath a fairer right, being English by the mother's side? Look for good preferment in my son's troop of horse,

Robin ! Faith, thou shalt carry the flag !—the enemy will not easily take it from thee. But no, that may not be ; his Majesty's commands are strict that all officers must be of gentleman's degree. I'll find out some good to do thee, nevertheless ; meanwhile, unstiffen yourselves, ye twain, in stable and pantry, and look that Rouge-*Dragon* lacks not his hoop of ale any more than thyself, good fellow ! Hie in now, daughter, and tell your mother these great news. I must make all in readiness to receive the royal Prince and his company.'

'And so should my mother and myself, methinks, sir,' said Arabella, whose brilliant eyes sparkled like diamonds, as she spoke, with some internal excitement. 'Should I not, think you, put on my court suit of the gold *paduasoy* (a rich brocaded Italian silk), which you presented me when the queen-mother came from France, and her Majesty herself wondered at the art of the green lustre amid the threads ?'

'Ay, my girl—ay, my girl ; we cannot show too much honour to so brave and noble a Prince,' replied the fond though pride-consumed father ; and as his glance fell on the bright beauty of the youthful woman who spoke, a vague but haughtily-ambitious notion crossed his mind, which, if put in words, might have run thus :—'*She* is royal in her beauty as he can be in his birth. *She* is the daughter of the man who raised this sumptuous pile, and who will soon achieve a peerage. *He*, though a prince, is a landless exile and fugitive. What if it is fated I should crown all my glories by mingling the blood of the *Holtes* with the blood-royal of England !'

Arabella herself had her visions at the moment that might thus have kept pace with her father's. 'The King's nephew can be but young,' she mused. 'So brave a soldier must be well inclined to love and courtesy. What a crown to all my conquests it would be—what a wonder and amaze to all my traducers and enviers—if I reckoned a Prince also among the hopeless servants and adorers of my charms ! I shall then have had the two extremes of men's conditions at my feet—a Prince and a town-mechanic—and I shall know that nothing can resist me where I will to conquer !'

The beautiful coquette was about to return into the Hall with this ambitious fancy glimmering in her mind, when precisely at the moment a clattering of horse-feet was audible in the lane on the Aston village side of the lofty wall inclosing the domain in that direction. Cheerful blasts of trumpets followed ; and while Sir Thomas and his fair daughter stood rooted to the spot with expectation and surprise, a moving mass of plumed hats, glittering breast-plates, horses' heads, banners, lances, appeared above the level of the ornamental zigzag coping of the wall.

'It is the Prince, or his vanguard. We are discovered ; we must not now trick ourselves out more showily than we stand. Come with me, Arabella, to receive his Highness ; you are more wont to courtly presences than I,' said Sir Thomas, looking, in fact, considerably flustered and alarmed, and drawing his daughter's arm into his own, somewhat against her will, for she rather hung back while the baronet strode forward, endeavouring to put a stout face on his inner failing of nerve. But he certainly did not expect to be greeted by a prince in such a trooper-

like style as he was, when now a stern, commanding voice shouted from over the wall :

‘Ho, good people here ; open your gates, in the King’s name, to his soldiers ; or must I set a petard (a kind of explosive shell) to the work ?’

‘What King’s officer can this rude man be ?’ said Sir Thomas, not a little indignantly, to Robin Falconer—who, he found, had his answer in readiness.

‘An’t please your worship, ’tis the glorious Prince !’

‘Prince Rupert !’ repeated Sir Thomas, in astonishment.

Glancing upward on the word, he perceived a dark grim countenance glaring at him from over the wall. Of noble features certainly, and strongly carved, with a considerable resemblance to the Stuart family in the long, saturnine lines, but with a fierceness and haughtiness mingled with all the fire and energy of the expression which the baronet was quite unwont to associate with the idea of royalty—the mildly melancholy and gracious visage of Charles I., presenting the *beau idéal* of a noble gentleman, born to an august but sorrowful doom—was the type of comparison in his mind, with which this savage, powder-blackened trooper’s little harmonised.

But there could no longer be a doubt on the subject ; and his own natural pride and disdain of mastery rallying to his aid, Sir Thomas Holte stepped forward with answering imperiousness of tone and gesture.

‘Any man is welcome to Aston Hall, in the King’s name ; but by much more the King’s nephew, sir, if you be such. The gates shall be freely opened ; and let me trust you keep your warlike munitions for the King’s enemies, not his friends, whereof Sir Thomas Holte—which is myself—have proved me one, to my much loss and suffering.’

‘Pardon, worthy knight !’ replied the commander, obviously struck by this style of reception, and showing a first sign of civility by raising his steel-lined hat. ‘But for aught I knew, your house might have passed over, with your heir, to rebel keeping. Henceforth, I trust, all will be well with both.’

Satisfied with this apology, Sir Thomas directed the great gate to be opened by his domestics, and the Prince rode in first and alone.

It was afterwards recalled, as an unlucky omen, that the Prince’s powerful snow-white charger stumbled as it passed the threshold. Indeed, it nearly brought its shoulder to the ground, startled by the sudden and ferocious baying of the chained mastiffs on either side of the entrance. But the tall and powerful rider sat as if he had been an integral portion of the animal he bestrode, and almost instantly regaining the mastery by a fierce, strong check of the reins, horse and man became fixed and rigid as if suddenly changed into a statuary group in bronze.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ANABAPTISTS.

MEANWHILE the progress of events in Birmingham, up to the arrival of Prince Rupert at Aston Hall, requires to be detailed.

On leaving his intended son-in-law at the Welsh Cross on the night of his daughter's imprisonment, highly indignant at Tubal's supposed want of proper feeling in the misfortune, Armourer Firebrace returned to his house in Deritend with a view to make sure of what he deemed the now sole remaining pledge of her safety and restoration. This was, of course, the person of Edward Holte, who was there detained a captive; already certainly, one would have thought, under sufficiently close care and guardianship. The two men whom Cronwell, with intuitive sagacity, had chosen for the purpose were admirably well adapted to it, though by different qualities.

Physical power could not be considered the attribute of the elder watchman—Sisyphus the bellows-blower, as he was generally styled in Birmingham.

He was an old soldier of the wars in Germany, in which James I. had timidly and underhandedly aided in the attempts to retrieve the unfortunate Palatine Frederic's dominions, and support the cause of Protestantism against the tyranny of the House of Austria. The English people, almost in spite of their Government, had joined with the enthusiasm of crusaders in these vain and ill-managed efforts; and among other fanatic zealots of a warlike turn, Sisyphus had volunteered in his youth in the regiment raised by Sir Horace Vere, and at the battle of Prague—where that valiant corps, maintaining the field to the last almost alone, was nearly cut to pieces—had the honour to lose his right arm by the shoulder, and his left hand by the wrist, under the hacking sabre of a pandour, who did not understand a cry for quarter in English. It is true that Sisyphus always persisted he had never asked for any, but was left for dead under a heap of other bleeding and mutilated carcases.

How he returned to his native land and town was an unknown mystery.

Many years had elapsed from the date of the decisive field in which he had so disastrously figured, when a maimed and miserable old beggar returned to Birmingham in place of the brave young zealot warrior who had quitted it. Very few remembered even the real name of the man, which was Gibeon Knippers. One that was conferred upon him accidentally stuck to him.

Tubal Bromycham, taking compassion on his helpless condition, set his ingenuity to work, and fashioned him an iron hook, which served him in some sort instead of a hand. Particularly, it enabled him to grasp the handle of the great smith's bellows, in use at that time, and heave it so as to keep the furnaces aglow. The charity of the townspeople backed Tubal's, and the maimed soldier was redeemed from absolute beggary by the wages of this occupation.

Scanty enough indeed, for his physical wants were, as reported, many and craving. And, doubtless, these unsatisfied corporeal desires reacted on his mind. It was the contrast of the devouring restlessness and fever of spirit visible in his countenance, with the patient monotony of his attitude and office, seated on a tree-trunk—for ever heaving at that for ever falling-back machine of wind, in Firebrace's factory, that had suggested to Edward Holte (then a mere schoolboy, fresh from his

first dip into the classic poets) the name of Sisyphus for him—that, it is well known, of the unfortunate, in Grecian mythology, who was condemned eternally to roll a stone up a hill in Tartarus, that as constantly rolled back.

The singularity of the term, and its appropriateness when explained, fixed it in men's memories, and speedily effaced that of 'German Gibby-Hook,' by which the maimed relic of the wars had at first been known in Birmingham.

But this disfigured carcass speedily became noted in the town for even more remarkable characteristics of mind than body.

In the general ferment of religious opinion and movement of ideas among the English people, it did not, indeed, at first seem strange that a person of the poorest, and apparently least qualified order of the populace, should set up for a theological teacher and guide. But amid all the extravagance and defiance of orthodox rules and restraint that prevailed, the doctrines and outward observances taught and enforced among the sect Sisyphus gradually formed around him in his native town, excited wonder and even dread and horror among its superior and well-to-do classes.

The regular parson of Birmingham, Dr. Dugdale, who had been appointed for his high Arminian and, as they were deemed, papistical principles, by Archbishop Laud himself, declared that these were the pernicious and levelling doctrines of the furious German fanatics who, under the name of Anabaptists, had infected that country with a blasphemous and devastating rebellion for many years after the dawn of the Reformation.

Bloodily suppressed by the princes and nobles of Germany, the trampled embers were still believed to smoulder and glow in secret places, ready again to burst forth into destructive flames. And during his long sojourn in the country of Jack of Leyden, 'German Gibby-Hook,' more known as 'Sisyphus, the bellows-blower,' was believed to have picked up divers direful sparks, and to have set them now among the popular tow to blaze.

The universal obliteration of all superiority in degrees and rank—community of goods and wives—were reported to be among the least formidable, society-undermining principles advocated by this new and dreadful order of sectaries. The means by which they were to accomplish these results of combined Mormonism and Socialism were alleged to be of the most sanguinary and ferocious instilment.

Not alone the destruction of the power and place of kings and nobles and priests, but of their persons, and by any means of assassination and violence, were intentions attributed in men's suspicions to the Anabaptist form of fanatic zeal.

Moreover, their religious teachings were surmised to be some strange and appalling mixture of atheism and demon worship, and the rights and ceremonies observed in their secret meetings and initiations were declared of a hideously indecent and blasphemous description. In particular a form of baptism by adults in a state of nudity, in the presence of the congregation, had been denounced even to the Magistracy, and visited with rigorous inquisition and punishment by a commission

of the Star Chamber, in which Sir Thomas Holte had figured as a prosecutor, with all the vehemence and violence of his character. With the usual ineffectualness of religious persecution, it was currently believed ; now, in latter times, becoming startlingly manifest.

The propagator of this dangerous sect was, indeed, the very species of enthusiast to make it flourish among a populace like that which formed the lowest in Birmingham at the period.

Ignorant and brutal to the last degree in their minds and manners—suffering under every species of physical discomfort and misery—toil-worn, crushed, and trampled on by all the superior classes of society—and yet visited by the breath and impulse of the great master influences of the age, in the desire for better things, spiritual and corporeal—no wonder the discontent and turbid superstition of the times, stirred to their depths, gave a ready acceptance to the democratic and visually imaginative theories of the Anabaptists. The doctrines of Mahomet, clothed in pretendedly Christian forms—his paradise realised on earth—what could be more seductive to the popular fancy? Mormonism in our days, which has built a city, and peopled a province, is nothing else, and has exhibited the influence of these ideas on the ignorant and unhappy dregs of the European communities, on a grand scale.

And Sisyphus the bellows-blower was peculiarly well-adapted by nature and circumstances for the office he took upon himself.

He had suffered in his proper person all the sufferings of his class—poverty, toil, mutilation—in their worst degrees. The latter calamity had almost disabled him from supplying the physical desires and longings that tormented his strong and ardent nature ; to say nothing of the fanatic enthusiasm and ambition always remarkable in his character, and threw him as by a kind of necessity on the means of obtaining influence for the purpose by swaying the minds of his fellows.

His own was deeply impregnated with German mysticism and visionariness ; and in the camps of the luckless chief of the Protestant struggle in the provinces of the Austrian empire, doubtless it had become imbued with the darkest and wildest theories of German fanaticism. He possessed a species of eloquence always acceptable to the populace—disdainful of logic and sequence, but full of fire and passion, and a rude species of poetical inspiration in the language and tone. But, above all, Sisyphus was a man of doubtless courage, or rather of the most frantic audacity, when he chose ; savage and relentless in his moods, and accustomed to scenes of violence and bloodshed. Little more was needed to make a dangerous sectarian leader in any age ; but in that, when a civil war, inspired chiefly by religious fanaticism, had just burst forth, German Gibby-Hook was the very man to cut a great figure on the stormy stage of events, had his lot cast him where they were prominent and decisive in the gaze of the world.

We need say but little of his coadjutor in the guard of Edward Holte, and ardent disciple, Faithful Moggs, although corporeally the main executive strength of the charge.

Faithful Moggs was a young man, a butcher by trade—as was pretty apparent from his ferocious visage, his blood-stained arms, naked to the

elbows, his no less horribly-hued garb of coarse blue baize, and the cleaver and steel at his girdle.

He had the implicit reverence and devotion of a dog to its master towards his maimed teacher, and would as readily and recklessly have obeyed the impulse of his will. He it was who wielded the most reliable weapons of the party, in the shape of a pair of large pistols, ready loaded, and placed on a small table between them at the door, inside the prisoner's apartment. But their relative positions were yet more marked in the fact that the tired slaughterman had been allowed to go to sleep on his arms, while Sisyphus, with his look of restless, wolfish vigilance, kept watch upon the prisoner's restlessness, ready to rouse his myrmidon to sudden action on the least appearance of occasion.

Edward Holte had refused to retire to the bed provided for him in the inner chamber of the Crown House, until the occasion of Mistress Dorothy Firebrace's protracted absence was explained.

The consternation diffused by this circumstance in the Firebrace family had not, in the first instance, it was likely, been shared by the captive Holte under its roof. Edward doubtless believed himself, at first, solely in possession of a sufficient and personally satisfactory explanation of what had now been for some time a subject of the highest alarm and apprehension with him also. The interval necessary for the accomplishment of Dorothy's mission had long elapsed, and as the night had grown in lateness and darkness, so had his fears and perplexity.

The beauty, the sprightliness, the generous self-devotion and kindly feeling evinced towards himself by the armourer's daughter, had excited, as we have seen, the warmest corresponding sentiments in the breast of the young cavalier. And the notion that he had, perhaps, exposed her to some great disaster on his account—certainly to misconception and anger on the part of her friends and relatives—annoyed Edward a great deal more than his own evidently increasing peril, and the discomforts of his position.

The grief and consternation of old Mahala herself had for some time yielded to the weariness and exhaustion of her years, and she sat asleep on a stool in a corner of the fire, in the great sitting-room of Firebrace's abode, with her apron over her withered and tear-blotched face, muttering yet uneasily in her repose. But Edward Holte was pacing the ample limits of his confinement with the restless movement of a native of the wilds caged for the first time; absorbed in anxious rumination, in which the sinister and ill-omened aspects of his new custodians scarcely entered at all. If his eye encountered at times the implacable glitter of watchfulness in the elder Anabaptist's steady glare, it was with scarcely a perception of its harmful meaning as regarded himself personally. He only felt that this fierce and armed vigilance stood between him and the possibility of proceeding in any manner to the aid of the lovely and generous girl who had hazarded so much to serve him.

What evil had befallen her? There was a wide choice of causes for distrustful apprehension to harass the luckless prisoner. The dark and little traversed way—the wild deer—the furious bull—his easily irri-

tated and recklessly passionate sire—the insidious counsels of his unlawful brother: though Edward was far from divining all the Cain-like malignancy and villany of which Richard Grimsorwe had shown himself capable. Amid this fertility of possible calamities, which had really occurred?

What rendered his state of mind still more distressing was that Edward dared not, in any manner, communicate his private grounds for apprehension. That would be to betray to her friends and townsfolk the assistance Dorothy was rendering to their supposed adversary.

And yet his conscience stung him ever and anon most piercingly with the notion that he might thus be withholding some needful aid and rescue to the fair girl. Several times he was on the point of stepping up to Sisyphus, for the last half-hour that had now elapsed, and begging him to inform some one who could follow in Mistress Firebrace's footsteps to Aston Hall, and ascertain her safety. But the fiercely fixed and menacing expression of the fanatic always checked and restrained him. It seemed to Edward Holte that by putting Dorothy's secret in the possession of this man, he should be rather placing a weapon to her harm in a cruel grasp, than securing the assistance she might but too disastrously need.

It may be imagined, therefore, that Edward distinguished with a sudden throbbing of hopeful expectation the voice of Dorothy Firebrace's father demanding admission from the exterior of the chamber. But his heart sank almost as immediately in his breast as the dismally excited tone of the request smote upon it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

YOUNG LOVE.

SISYPHUS grumbled sadly at having to rouse his executive and comply with the summons, even of the assigned head of the great movement in the town and master of the house. And Edward Holte was made rather startlingly aware of the imminent danger of his position when Faithful Moggs, suddenly roused, sprung on his feet with both his pistols snatched and levelled at the captive! Had not Edward halted on his perturbed march, and sternly inquired what the fellow meant, it was even possible a discharge might have put all his perplexities at rest for ever.

Sisyphus, however, stretched his iron hook before the muzzle of the weapons.

'Quiet, Moggs! do not hurt my young *godfather*,' he said with a grim smile. 'It is only old Firebrace returning to his hearth; order arms, and I will admit him.'

Moggs, understanding that he was to withdraw his menacing demonstration, crossed his arms, with the pistols in his hands, on his breast, turning his unshaven, blue-bristly, hog-like visage towards the door. The bellows-blower then opened it and admitted the master armourer, whose first words most unpleasantly explained the mystery of Dorothy's

absence, and satisfied Edward Holte too certainly that there was no further occasion of any reserve on his own part.

'So, Master Holte, Master Holte ! you have used some witchcraft on my daughter, to win her to do your errand to Aston Hall, against her duty to her town and kinsfolk ; and yet there your inhuman father has made the poor child a miserable, frightened captive in his high Dome-Chamber, and threatened her with all manner of worser cruelties, unless we surrender you !' Firebrace exclaimed, almost sobbing as he spoke with mingled grief and rage.

Edward was greatly grieved and shocked by the intelligence. Yet it was in some sort a relief from still more disastrous apprehensions. Neither was it consonant with his proud and manly feelings to attempt any denial of the discovered facts of the case. His reply admitted the charge in some way.

'Do not impute to me the *merit* of your daughter's resolution to endeavour to remove the disgrace of your inhospitable and unlawful conduct from her house ; and to prevent any rash movement of my father's justly provoked indignation against your town, master armoutier,' he said ; adding apologetically, 'But I am sure my father, of his own prompting, is incapable of such oppression and slighting of my earnest commendations as regards the virtuous maiden's safety. Grimsorwe, my bastard brother, has put his mischievous counsel in the matter, we may be sure.'

'He is in the town, putting himself to all manner of jeopardy on your behalf, ungrateful young man !' returned Firebrace, vehemently. 'But when were not the Holtes bitter and rancorous against each other, as well as masterful oppressors to all the world beside ?'

Edward, however, continued to appear by no means pleasingly excited by the intelligence he received of the interference in his behalf. His brow darkened. 'You know not the man ; and I myself, perchance, suspect him but in part,' he went on to say. 'Yet, howsoe'er, Richard is as dear to my father in some sense—perhaps dearer as regards his likings personal—as myself. Keep him as a hostage in my room, and I swear to you I will return within an hour with your daughter safe and redeemed ; or alone, to suffer anything your anger can inflict for the failure.'

'Why, so let it be ; Master Grimsorwe himself proposes a fair exchange,' said Firebrace, eagerly. 'My good men, I relieve you of your charge, and take upon me all the responsibility of the young gentleman's release. Here's money for your pains hitherto, and now go your ways in peace.'

'Money !' replied Sisyphus, glancing contemptuously at the proffered coins, 'to whom do you offer so mean a bribe, Master Firebrace ? Fill this chamber with gold, and you cannot purchase my fidelity ! I am a soldier, placed at a post by the captain to whom I have promised obedience ; have you an order from the hand of the London man of war, Oliver Cromwell, for the prisoner's release ? For or not——'

'Am I not declared ruler of the town for the Parliament ? Am I not your master and employer, man ?' returned Firebrace, angrily, but eluding the main question.

'I am a soldier of the wars. I own no master, no ruler, but my

military officer, while a town is, as ours is now, under martial restraint and ordering,' replied Sisyphus; adding, with every appearance of inflexible resolve, 'and sooner than suffer my prisoner to pass out of my hands without the said permit, I will hook him up to the bacon-beams of the chamber here with this wretched mockery of a hand of mine!'

'It shall not need, Sisyphus,' said the butcher lad, savagely: 'I can fell an ox at a blow; and if even the captain's pistols fail us, I have my chopper at my side.'

'How have I injured you, brutish fellow, that you threaten me thus?' said Edward, indignant at such uncalled-for ferocity of antipathy.

'Shall I do anything, master? Do you not say we are to begin with the gentlemen's throats, and so on upwards?' said Faithful Moggs.

'You seem more like murderers than watchers!' the armourer exclaimed, in disgust. 'But be assured, Master Holte, harm shall only reach you through my body first. At present we must abide these rude men's pleasures; only, Sisyphus, be you well assured you shall never more blow the bellows at any forge of mine!'

'Amen to that, master armourer; for never was flesh wearier of such service than mine! I shall blow blasts henceforth to mightier flames!' returned the fanatic; 'flames that shall wrap loftier heads than any I espy here, tower haughtily as ye both may to hear me speak; heads loftier than the tallest steeples in the land!'

'Shall there be giants now again in these days in the land, Sisyphus?' said Moggs, gazing with stupid curiosity at his teacher. 'And shall I live to see them?'

'Let us leave these madmen. Already our town is given over to such,' groaned Firebrace, turning from his allies to his prisoner with visible preference.

'It is but a natural sequence that all authority should be contemned when the highest is assailed the first, and toppled over,' said the young cavalier; but he followed Firebrace with some satisfaction to a distance from the ferocious twain, who were so well provided with the means to execute any suddenly vengeful caprice that might enter their wild fantasy.

The guardsmen returned to their former position, whence both continued now to watch in grim silence the demeanour of their captive and of their master, whose authority they had so decisively refused.

It can hardly be thought that Edward Holte, aware of this observation, and how completely he was within the range of a bullet, felt very much at his ease in the confabulation that ensued. Nevertheless, he speedily forgot all that concerned himself personally in his efforts to console the bereaved father, and to comfort him as much as in him lay on the score of his daughter's imprisonment. And it was clear that Firebrace was somewhat consoled by the favourable view of circumstances presented to him by Edward Holte, and his earnest assurances that, however provoked, his father was incapable of personal insult or violence towards a woman.

'Mistress Firebrace will be detained until he knows of my safety—no longer. What can you fear for your daughter while Sir Thomas's son is in your hands?' he remarked on one occasion, loudly; and it was an unlucky observation.

'Hear you that, bellows-blower, what my fine gentleman says?' muttered the disciple Anabaptist to his leader. 'Were it not good to rid the town of all danger of making it up with the tyrant at Aston, who had me prisoned and whipped three several times at the Market Cross for cutting up a deer carcass which I found rotting from Tubal Bromycham's cross-bow bolt, nigh Oscott Wood?'

Sisyphus mused upon this. 'Troth,' he said, with a dark smile, 'look at them even now—the masters of the poor sweating commonalty *here*, and the masters of the poor sweating commonalty *there*! We must put a river of blood between us and returning on our steps! Our blessed Jordan must flow redder than the sea that swallowed Pharaoh and all his host for that! Who knoweth by what lips God may speak in these latter days? He hath spoken of old by the braying of the insensate ass! This son of my bowels looks like a wild hog. But what then? Was Knipperdolling of Munster an angel of light to look upon? No, I trow me! What didst thou say, friend, concerning the young man Holte?'

'I said that you have often told me we are to be baptized unto the new life, but not as by water—by blood!' returned the fanatic young butcher, with such a glance at Edward Holte as perchance he gave the doomed ox when the luckless beast turned its mildly terrified eyes on the destroyer, entering, mace in hand, into the dreadful byre at early dawn.

'What if I should say unto thee—*Smite and spare not!* is the power given unto thee? Hast thou the heart to strike to the earth this unarmed man, our prisoner?' said Sisyphus.

The younger fanatic was still an Englishman. This view of the case somewhat staggered him. 'An unarmed man and a prisoner! I thought not of that!' he muttered. 'If you would have it done, why do you put such thoughts in my head?'

'Well, for myself, I have been a soldier! I have been a soldier in the camps of a brave though unfortunate prince and chief, and in the heat of battle who spareth? Where are my arm and my hand? And is not this the heat of battle? Is not this the heat of the worst battle, calm as we sit here—the battle between man and his own soul? Arise, I say, and spare not! Who talks of sparing? Rivers begin with rivulets. Let us have the blood of the young man Holte to begin with! What say you, Faithful Moggs?'

'I am ready,' replied the latter, rising impetuously. 'Shall it be with the ball of lead or the edge of steel?'

'What mean these fellows, speaking and looking at me thus?' said Edward, surprised at the movement. 'Certainly they mean murder! But I shall defend my life.'

So saying, he snatched one of the heavy andirons from the grate, and Armourer Firebrace, casting old Mahala from her stool, clutched it up simultaneously, and exclaiming, 'And I will defend your life, too, with mine, while under my roof, Master Holte,' evidently ranged himself on the weaker side.

Some overruling fate seemed always to conduct Dorothy Firebrace to the preservation of Edward Holte. It was precisely at this instant that

a loud rapping was heard at the door, and Tubal Bromycham's thundering accents were heard, 'Open at once, you within, or I batter down the door! It is Mistress Dorothy returned.'

Sisyphus hesitated for a moment. He then gave a hoarse laugh. 'Be quiet, Moggs,' he said; 'Tubal is a man of his word. Calm thy good thirst, man, for this time; a fitter will arrive.'

He then, for the second time, unbarred and opened the door, and Dorothy Firebrace sprang into the chamber, closely followed by Tubal Bromycham.

'My father! my father!'

'My child! my child!'

The father and daughter folded each other at once in a delighted embrace, while Edward Holte himself, unable to restrain the impulse of his feelings, seized one hand of the fair girl over Firebrace's shoulder, and covered it with kisses.

We are far from sure, however, that he was exactly pleased when Dorothy's first exclamation informed her father and himself that she owed her deliverance to the heroic courage and goodness of Tubal Bromycham, her betrothed husband. She did not, indeed, call him so, but Edward Holte uncomfortably remembered such was the relation in which she stood to the valiant smith.

Nor could he be spared a rapid and broken but full detail of the circumstances of Dorothy's escape from Aston Hall, which she breathlessly told—omitting, in fair consideration for the master-cook, his share in the evasion. But the story was intelligible enough without that circumstance, and redounded in every respect to the credit and exaltation of the daring and fortitude of Tubal Bromycham.

The young smith himself, however, listened to the detail with a downcast and saddened look. It seemed almost as if he would have preferred to suppress all the particulars of his achievements, and that results alone he wished should be attended to. More than once he interrupted Dorothy Firebrace's lavish eulogium of his courage, kindness, and unflinching perseverance in effecting the entire departure and flight. And as soon as ever he could, with any propriety, he begged the armourer to excuse him for the night, as he felt it now his duty to return to the guard of the town.

'Go, then; but take these insolent fellows with you, whose looks are full of murder and menace to my guest and prisoner,' said Firebrace, who himself uneasily felt the propriety of ending the scene. 'I and my servants are sufficient to retain him so. What do these strangers in my house against my will?'

'Come, sirs, you hear!' said Tubal, surveying the Anabaptists with undisguised repugnance and command.

'That shall we not!' returned Sisyphus, insolently. 'We are placed on duty here by Captain Cromwell, and shall not stir without his own release.'

'Tubal Bromycham sets up for a new lord in the land, bellows-blower; and hast thou not said we will have none such, even of the old sort?' chimed in Faithful Moggs.

'Ha, say you, butcher!' exclaimed Tubal, suddenly clutching the

fellow by the nape of the neck, in a strangling grasp, that showed he had regained the power of his strenuous sinews. 'Shall I make thy tongue lollop like one of thy overdriven beasts, or wilt thou yield without further insolency to do the bidding of the Lord and Captain of the Watch of Birmingham? There is no greater sway than mine, I will have all men know, in the town. So wilt thou take thy executioner's knave hence quietly, Sisyphus, or must I throw him down the gallery stairs, for thee to follow?'

'I have only mine hook—you have the poor honest man at mercy; we will go and complain to the Parliament gentleman,' replied Sisyphus, spitefully but submissively surveying the superior array of force against him and his. 'Release my brother; he grows black in the face!'

'Hence with you, then, both, and I will myself return these pistols, with explanations, to the Captain,' said Tubal, disarming the butcher Anabaptist by a sudden and most dexterous movement; and opening the door, he compelled the worthy twain to complete the evacuation of the premises ere, with a gentle and kindly good-night to the entire group, he followed forth.

And a good night there was at the Old Crown Forge House. Firebrace forgot every other consideration in joy at the safe restoration of his daughter by the heroic efforts of her betrothed, which satisfied him that a notion, which had given himself some uneasiness, had taken no hold in that generous lover's mind. Edward Holte's jealous perturbation was lost in joy at the same event, and a faint consciousness that, however well another had deserved, he himself retained the first place in the fair fugitive's good liking and esteem. All were rejoiced to be rid of the uncomfortable and dangerous company of the Anabaptist.

Firebrace vented his satisfaction in an approved English form. He ordered the awakened and rejoicing Mahala to prepare a good supper, and produced some choice Canary wine to exhilarate the repast. And the prisoner and his friendly gaolers partook with great relish and satisfaction of this meal in each other's society, diversified by a renewed account of Dorothy's adventures at Aston Hall—at least, so far as related to her imprisonment by Sir Thomas Holte. She let Edward know how much his father's proceedings were stirred on and excited by Richard Grimsworve in that matter; but for reasons of her own, and not to excite her father's indignation too warmly, she suppressed all further elucidation of his villany until she could find opportunity to confide it alone to the person most interested in hearing the whole truth.

This did not occur until the following day; but then ample occasion was afforded. Firebrace, lulled by Tubal's example against all suspicion, and summoned to the Guildhall to confer on further measures of defence, left his daughter in the company of his captive for many subsequent hours. And as Dorothy had the rest of the household completely at her command, she speedily found means to be left with him without eaves-droppers, and then proceeded to divulge the amplest particulars of the events with which the reader is already acquainted.

The sensible and spirited young girl judged it but a simple matter of right and duty to warn Edward Holte, as much as was in her power, of the traitorous designs and plans of his wicked brother; so much at least

of them as had come at all under her observation, believing herself in a manner led by Providence to the discovery.

Of course, this revelation included the plot she had overheard in concoction between Richard Grimsorwe and his witch-grandmother, to oust Edward Holte from his birthright and lawful position as heir of Aston ; matter enough to excite the cavalier's vehement indignation, though it was probable it was not for the first time that Edward had conjectured some such crafty atrocity of purpose, at least, on Grimsorwe's part. But Dorothy was obliged also, by her own justly excited feelings of resentment, to declare to him how well-founded his opinion of the lawyer's coarse licentiousness and brutal violence of disposition towards women had proved. And then, indeed, did Edward's emotions become almost too powerful to be restrained ; and he vowed to inflict signal personal chastisement on the unmanly wretch, the very first opportunity that presented itself.

' Brother, no ! I have never looked upon the livid-faced scoundrel as such, and now less than ever will I, while I breathe God's vital air ! ' he exclaimed. ' Brother ! that name shall scarce stand between my sword's point and his traitorous heart.' And when Dorothy Firebrace, with the vivacious good sense and generosity which formed so large a portion of her character, entreated him to promise her that he would only use the information she afforded him to keep on his guard against his unnatural enemy, Edward Holte could no longer resist the impetuous feeling that took possession of him.

' I consent—I consent, if only you—you, beautiful Dorothy ! will promise to continue my guardian angel. On that condition only ! fairest, dearest of women !—on condition only that you allow me to repair, by my honest love and devotion, the injury and insult of that licentious villain's address. Do you, will you consent, loveliest Dorothy ? And do not deem this declaration sudden and unadvised. I felt the first moment I saw you again in the market square, on that eventful yesterday, that I have loved you all my life—from my earliest youth to manhood ! It was that feeling, doubtless, that made me resolve—although my father, from some secret reason of his own, would have had me seek another chapman—to purchase my weapons only at your father's stithy ! Dearest Dorothy, I cannot live and fancy you in danger to become another's, and who, yourself have confessed, is all but indifferent to you, whatever the value of his services may have been on the recent occasion ! I would have hazarded my life as cheerfully—a thousand times more cheerfully, for the reward of your least regarded smile !'

In short, the romantic circumstances and exigency of the position—the unparalleled devotion exhibited towards him by the beautiful and impassioned girl—his conviction that she regarded him with peculiar affection, and yet ran danger of a sacrifice to family arrangements like himself—the inborn warmth and enthusiasm of his character—transported Edward Holte into forgetfulness of all but the great objects of his overpowering emotion ; while, on her part, Dorothy Firebrace, attracted by the noble and chivalrous realisation of her brightest and longest cherished visions of the high-born, courtly suitor at her feet, yielded in her turn to the delicious intoxication of a first and passionate love. And when the

youthful pair awoke again to realities, they stood plighted and pledged each other's against all the malice of fortune and of fate.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RUPERT'S RAID.

LOVE-MAKING, though the most delightful of all occupations to those engaged in it, is seldom found to be so charming and fascinating in the description. Though who, indeed, can hope properly to describe that fairest flowering of the heart and soul in early youth, styled by mortals Love? What poet's pen has ever yet done justice even to so inferior a form of nature's development as the beauty and sweetness of a hedge of maythorn, lured into full flush of scented snow by the warm freshness of spring?

We are not about to add, therefore, to the numerous failures in this department, by attempting much detail of the few days—hours they appeared to them—of exquisite happiness granted to Dorothy Firebrace and her lover in the first dawn of their disaster-heralded and accompanied passion. Suffice it in general now to say, that nearly the entire interval so uncomfortably filled up by Sir Thomas Holte at Aston Hall, expecting the arrival of military aid against Birmingham, was devoted by the youthful pair to the fullest avowal and confirmation of their mutual attachment; and that in those three days the destinies of the two loving and generous hearts were irrevocably sealed to each other by all the most passionate plights and tokens of affection compatible with maiden delicacy and purity on one part, supported by the noble self-restraint and forbearance of a true gentleman and man of honour towards the woman whom he intends to make his wife.

Such was the purpose which Edward Holte, in face of all the difficulties too visibly awaiting such a project on every hand, was not only obliged by Dorothy's spirited demand, but by his own manly and honourable nature, to avow towards her with his first words of passionate overflow. And never were oaths and promises made and renewed with more fervid sincerity than those which rose to the young lover's lips on that and many subsequent occasions.

A rapturous delirium, in all sober consideration, doubtless, but attended, as usual, in the case of the armourer's daughter and her now plighted worshipper, with answerable bright lunacies of hope and expectation.

Edward indeed knew, and fairly avowed, that it was out of the question ever to dream of obtaining his father's consent to the union thus agreed upon.

Sir Thomas Holte's towering pride and lofty views for his entire family, and most especially his heir and representative; the engagements he had entered into on his son's behalf with another—alike forbade the merest gleam of hope in that direction. But, besides those obstacles of position and station, there were now arisen still more formidable bars of political and even religious separation between the children of a high-

church Royalist and an adherent to the sectarian Parliament of London—obstacles which every hour and every movement of the adverse factions threatened to increase rather than diminish, and which blood seemed likely soon to set into flow and collision.

The strongest and most exasperating prejudices and enmities of the human mind were already enlisted, it was but too plain, against the hopes of our new Romeo and Juliet of Birmingham. It was even certain that the Puritan Capulet himself, Armourer Firebrace, would be as opposed as his co-parent against their plans, and was as likely to cherish his own in the disposal of his child as the haughty and despotic lord of Aston himself.

A brightness nevertheless shone through all this gloom, and arched the blackest clouds with rainbows, from founts in the human heart as little liable, apparently, to exhaustion as the light of the eternal sun itself; and Edward Holte drew his from so unlikely a source even as the progress of the dreadful species of war which was evidently commenced.

He trusted to be able to distinguish himself in its course in such a manner as to establish an independent position in the favour and protection of his sovereign, that would enable him to assert the natural privileges of manhood, to choose the woman as his wife with whom he could best prefer to spend his days; and, in the lover's sanguine views, Dorothy's position, as the daughter of a man of influence and high respectability, in so important a place as Birmingham, though his power was exerted at present unfavourably to the king, gave her adhesion to the royal cause peculiar claims on Charles's attention.

Firebrace, on his part, was evidently not one of the desperate antagonists of regal sway and orthodoxy which the times subsequently produced.

The word republic was still of unknown sound and meaning to the great body of the English middle classes, who opposed themselves, in the first place, to what they deemed the unconstitutional exactions and assumptions of sole mastery on the part of the King and his favourite advisers. And Dorothy took good care to impress upon her aristocratic lover the fact that her father prided himself on a descent from a noble French race, by a genealogy easily traced and proved; meanwhile it was undoubted that her sire was wealthy, according to the estimate of wealth in those days, and that she was his only child and inheritrix? Was not all this full of hopefulness?

To complete these grounds for confidence in futurity, Dorothy no longer made a secret to Edward Holte of the reasons that existed to free him from all anxiety on the score of Tubal Bromycham's rivalry. She frankly stated to the young cavalier what she had learned of her betrothed's luckless and devoted passion for Arabella, his sister, and the explanation that had passed between herself and him in the Dome-Chamber at Aston Hall.

Edward had never heard anything of this circumstance before. It had all taken place during his absence at the University. And Sir Thomas Holte's pride was, in reality, too acutely stung by the whole event—there were such peculiar and not easily explicable incidents in

connection with the subject—that he had suppressed the wounding details as much as possible to every one. But in particular he disliked confiding to his lawful son, whose high-toned sense of justice and clear understanding, he instinctively felt, could not have been misled by any disguise or artifice of allegation.

Even Richard Grimsorwe, whose congenial worldliness and indifference to any fine sense of right Sir Thomas appreciated, had only come into possession of the story by indirect means of his own. And it must be confessed that the family haughtiness of feeling in the Holtes revolted in Edward also, in the first instance, from the notion of a person in a mechanical occupation aspiring to the hand of a daughter of his house. But when Dorothy explained to him the well-founded pretension of Tubal the smith to the honours and possessions of the ancient lords of Birmingham, this petulant emotion greatly abated.

Edward was familiar with the sad particulars of the fall of that ancient race, in which an ancestor of his own had disgracefully figured. He had often reflected on the injustice and barbarous tyranny of the transaction, and to put so great a wrong right appeared to him in the highest degree agreeable to justice, and to the ideas of a legal and settled order of things, which he and other enlightened Royalists hoped to re-establish in England.

Nor was he without some secret consolation in the notion that such an occurrence must partially have awakened Sir Thomas Holte to the fact that his children were looked upon as ordinary mortals, and by no means as set apart for destinies so lofty and peculiar as his towering pride suggested. And though he could scarcely yield any of his own to Dorothy's warm-hearted credulity of belief that at some period his sister must have encouraged, probably have shared, the feelings of her low-placed suitor, the notion flattered Edward with a hope that he should find a support and ally in her to his own projects, in what he knew would be looked upon at Aston Hall as a miserably plebeian descent in alliance. He knew well that his sister was as attached to him as her volatile and usually selfishly engaged affections could permit.

It must be added, also, that Dorothy had not the courage to reveal the whole disastrous tale, or the disgraceful circumstances of the personal encounter between Tubal and Sir Thomas, and the maltreatment of the former in consequence. She thought it might be allowed her to be supposed ignorant of these adjuncts, and that some happy change of fortune would dispose the main parties in the dispute to mutual pardon and oblivion.

In short, Love is known to be a logician on his own side only, and these two young people, thrown almost completely into each other's society for so considerable an interval, were plunged in all the first most unreasoning conceits and illusions of inexperienced acquirement.

The lovers retained so much sense, however, as to be quite aware that any open declaration of their attachment and engagement was for the moment entirely out of the question. That would be merely to secure their own immediate separation, and would place the strongest imaginable engine in the hands of the sordid and rancorous brother whose designs

Dorothy Firebrace had been so providentially enabled to discover and disclose.

Meanwhile the most unlikely circumstances seemed all to work to throw them together, without danger of exciting suspicion by too anxious a seeking of opportunities. Firebrace himself urged upon his daughter to remain constantly in the house, having ascertained that the townspeople were greatly offended at her taking part so evidently with their enemies.

The active babbling of Richard Grimsorwe diffused the information everywhere. The populace, with whom Tubal Bromycham had become a sudden object of enthusiasm, were perplexed, but irritated at the danger to which his betrothed's rashness had exposed their idol, while, nevertheless, his exploit in her rescue excited their triumphant admiration. And now, as the armourer himself was obliged to be constantly abroad, on the business of the office he had accepted in the insurgent town, all very restraining supervision was withdrawn from Dorothy's doings.

Old Mahala, charged specially with the duty, was subject to divers infirmities of age, or was not perhaps still so old a woman as to set herself resolutely against what she most likely considered the passing fanciful caprice of an indulged girl for a very handsome young man.

As for Tubal, the betrothed husband himself, never was less opposition offered from rivalry than his. Indeed, he scarcely approached the Firebrace mansion at all during Edward's whole stay, excepting on forge business, connected with the defensive preparations of the town.

Tubal had, in fact, made a new home for himself at some considerable distance from the Crown House. Dorothy was glad to be enabled to relate to her lover, as confirmation of her previous story, that Tubal had taken possession of the old castellated residence of his ancestors, known as the Moat House, in the centre of Birmingham, in spite of some degree of resistance on the part of the high bailiff, or rather of the high bailiff's wife, who raised the drawbridges and stood a little siege, until hunger and fear made that functionary determine rather to brave his lady's wrath, and yield up his stronghold on the sly. And there Tubal had hoisted the long-disused banner of his family, and had openly taken upon himself all the privileges and rule of a lord of Birmingham—Cromwell, Firebrace, and a strong majority of the upper classes of the town, backing him in what he did, and only a small portion of the lowest fanatics and populace murmuring against the restoration.

Yet all this was only part of the turmoil and tumult now raging in Birmingham. Defensive preparations were in constant activity, and almost the whole population engaged vigorously in them.

Trenches were dug, earth-mounds and barricades erected at all the principal entrances of the town, chains stretched across the river and smaller inlets; every military precaution taken which the rude, unfamiliar acquaintance, both of leaders and general combatants, with the resources of the military art allowed.

Cromwell himself was obliged to give his directions from an old book of Roman *Castrametation*, or camp-making, which formed part of his travelling library, by the gift—as was written in the title-page—of his loving cousin and fellow-truster in Christ, John Hampden. But his

sagacious eye and apt military instinct supplied every deficiency. Moreover, with the faculty always observed in great men of discerning and directing the abilities and knowledge of others to the furtherance of their own ends, Cromwell selected Sisyphus the bellows-blower as a species of foreman in his operations, for which his experience in the scientific and yet ferocious religious wars of Germany well qualified him. And the Parliament Captain's condescension to this maimed relic of old battles, meanwhile, greatly recommended him to the populace, with whom the bellows-blower was in high esteem; and his faculty of lending himself to the ideas and speaking the impassioned jargon of the obscurest and wildest fanaticism, secured him the respectful deference of the Anabaptists.

Tubal Bromycham's example and strenuous personal activity carried forward the executive part of this work at an answerable rate. So, from all this it came to pass that, make what haste his impetuous spirit and quick resolve could urge upon him, Prince Rupert arrived considerably too late for the species of assault he doubtless projected on Birmingham—a *coup de main*, as a sudden onslaught without artillery or other regular means of reduction was styled, being in his contemplation; as plainly appeared from the condition in which he presented himself, with a single overridden and exhausted troop of horse, at the fortified inclosures of the town.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TOCSIN.

THE lovers, absorbingly occupied in their own fears and hopes, delights and sufferings, took little notice of what was happening in the outward world.

Dorothy perhaps, trembling always for the safety of her beloved prisoner, kept up some degree of observation and vigilance. But her father's reports described a state of things which rather flattered the pair with the prospects of a speedily approaching deliverance than added to their apprehensions, now that the fair girl also had become so fervidly royalist. Yet still her dread of evil towards Edward Holte was fed by her knowledge that his traitorous brother continued in the town; apparently, it is true, in the position of a captive, under the observation of Cromwell. But she well remembered how Grimsorwe had avowed to his witch-grandmother his purpose to seek furtherance in his malicious project from the new powers in the state.

And here it should be noticed that this circumstance, in conjunction with another he ascertained in the same series of revelations, had almost more than anything else stirred Edward Holte's unceasing apprehensions.

Dorothy had mentioned, without herself attaching much stress to the fact, that one of the reasons alleged for her detention at Aston was the power put in her hands by Sir Thomas's imprudent revelations, of revealing the King's dangerous position in his quarters at Nottingham. She had alluded to it, only still more plainly to evince her loyal senti-

ments to her loyal lover, by declaring her own utter incapability of such mean betrayal. Edward was painfully impressed with the circumstance in quite another point of view.

'My father's rashness has then placed so momentous a secret on the tongue of my villanous brother, who tables and almost beds, from all that I hear, with this determined London officer !' he remarked.

He strove, however, to take as assuring a view of the unlucky fact as the cheerful-natured Dorothy urged upon him.

'What matters it if even Grimsorwe reveals the state of things to Captain Cromwell ? What harm can happen of it ?' she said, smilingly. 'Our townspeople evidently think only of their own defence. I heard that the captain should say he would not suffer a man out of the barricades till those within had got accustomed to the show and tramp of cavalry (nothing else is to be feared), and skilled in the set of the pike to keep them off. And such lubberly rogues as Mistress Mellons, of the Black Boy, tells our Mahala they look, at work in the market-place, under Tubal's captaincy, who hardly himself knows the mere words of command ! They show as if rather begging their lives on their knees than bent on so warlike an endeavour, and rise in such confusion that a butting ram could scatter them ! Be Richard Grimsorwe's motive what it will, dearest Edward, he could find no means in Birmingham to execute any such distant harm against his Majesty as your changed complexion hints.'

Edward was soothed, if not altogether reassured, by this view of things.

He, no more than the rest of their contemporaries, was aware of the matchless audacity and energy of Cromwell's character. So great an outrage as a direct assault of the royal person had as yet crossed no man's mind, the zealous Royalist succeeded in persuading himself ; or, if the notion could be formed, what means of execution were there where in the power of an undisciplined rabble ? And the nearest of the Parliamentary forces were at such distances from Nottingham, as to render it unlikely any project requiring an extensive military movement could be put in execution without exciting such alarm as to render it abortive.

On the occasion now to be mentioned, Dorothy's apprehensions were, in consequence of this reasoning, by no means turned upon the safety of the King ; but a general alarm was excited in the town by the ringing backward of the great bell of St. Martin's. A look-out was stationed night and day in the steeple there, and the jangle of bells, rung out of tune, was a previously agreed upon signal of any suspicious external approach.

It was about noonday, and things were proceeding quietly enough in a busy way in the town, when this dissonant signal of danger became audible. In a moment all Birmingham was in a ferment and uproar.

The townspeople, emerging armed as well as might be with hastily snatched weapons from their different abodes, thronged into the streets, and hurried, also by previous arrangement, to the market-place. In particular, a considerable mob of smiths and hammermen of various kinds swarmed up Deritend, chiefly wielding the great weapon of their craft, and took their way with zealous rapidity to the Moat House.

there to place themselves under the immediate command of Tubal Bromycham.

Armourer Firebrace was disturbed in a nap he was taking after dinner in his chair ; and with some trepidation, though not of a personal kind, declared that he must proceed at once to the Guildhall to meet the other elders and councillors of the town, and devise the best means to aid in the defence and preserve internal order. The poor old man's emotion was altogether on account of his daughter ; and Edward Holte was affected and surprised to find that he recommended her to the care of his prisoner, in case things went ill for the defence. ' For we mean only our lawful *defence*, fair sir,' he said, ' and by no means any assault and battery of our own driving against his Majesty's peace and soldiery, if such they be that have come against our town. I must not leave my fellows in any jeopardy I can share ; but if your friends make themselves a passage into the town, I trust you will remember towards my child that I have kindly, honourably, and safely entertained you under my roof.'

Edward declared with peculiar warmth that he would lose his own life rather than that any ill should befall his generous young hostess. And Dorothy thereupon earnestly demanded of her father whether he left protection sufficient for his prisoner's safety during his absence ; upon which the armourer announced his intention to lock up and bar up the entire house and forge until he could return, the massive bolts and doors of which would alone resist any violence but that of artillery.

Satisfied with this provision for the safety of her lover, and anxious to obtain the earliest intelligence of what might happen affecting his condition, Dorothy, however, now begged her father's leave to accompany him into the town. ' At least to the market-place,' she said ; adding, truly enough, that her anxiety would be much greater at a distance from whatever might occur to decide results than if she was an eye-witness of them. If there were any appearance of danger, she promised at once to return to Deritend, a quarter of the town which, as any assault to be made was apprehended in the direction of Aston only at this time, was the farthest removed from actual peril.

Edward Holte objected earnestly to this arrangement. But Dorothy persevered, perhaps with some slight mixture of coquetry in her expressions of unwillingness to remain. And the armourer himself, apparently for the first time noticing the smiles of mutual intelligence between the youthful pair, rather hurriedly and grimly declared to his daughter that she was in the right, and should accompany him wherever he went. ' They do not ask of us greybeards to take any share in the actual battling,' he said, ' and you will be as safe with me at the Guildhall—or safer—than here. Don your cloak and hood, and let us foot it at once.'

So it was determined, and so acted upon. Dorothy took a laughingly kind adieu of her forlorn lover, whom she left in the care of old Mahala and the other female domestics, while his saddened eyes reproached her for depriving him of the hours of happiness that might else have followed in each other's company. But Dorothy herself superintended the labour of the workman who closed and locked all the

entrances of the Crown Forge—a precaution scarcely necessary as regarded the prisoner's secure keeping, for even if he could have made his way out of the house, the exits of the town were all too well guarded to allow of any further evasion.

Firebrace gave his arm to his daughter on quitting their premises into Deritend; and with a grave and solemnly-bearded aspect, with the handle of an altogether unused sword ostentatiously figuring above a lift in his long cloak, the master armourer proceeded up the causeway, amidst the continued discordant summons of the tocsin, which resembled more the palpitation of an affrighted human heart than the jangle of a bell.

He took the direction of the church, in which the principal number of people were also speeding; speedily joined as he advanced by other chief citizens of the district. Only such presumed to join the slow and poised advance of the master armourer. But everyone whom they passed, or mixed with in the progress, treated this head townsman with great marks of respect and deference. Dorothy for herself could not but perceive that, though her father's presence protected her from much open signs of the popular disapproval, she obtained a novel and unpleasant species of notice when she came into public view. 'Takes part with those of Aston! What doth she abroad now in our midst? To play the spy for them there?' harsh, though undertoned, voices more than once muttered in her wake.

The pride and defiance of Dorothy Firebrace's nature were, however, awakened, rather than her fears, under this rebuking reception. She held up her beautiful, fiery head, with the action of a high-mettled charger, in disdain, and was only sorry when she felt her father's arm quiver in her hold, in a manner that denoted his keen sense of the species of public distaste exhibited towards his child.

Until they quitted Deritend these symptoms continued mild enough. But having once passed out of the quarter where the master armourer was all powerful, the aspect of things by no means improved.

Dorothy, nevertheless, ceased to take much personal interest in what regarded herself in her anxiety to ascertain the position of affairs. No one they had hitherto met or joined in with knew what was the occasion of the alarm. But on reaching the market-place, with a view to cross it to the Guildhall, the throng of people became very greatly increased, and evident marks of consternation appeared in the faces of the majority. 'The King's cavalry are upon us from Worcester!' was the general mutter and murmur. 'They are about Edgbaston Row; William Moorcroft has espied them as well nigh into the town as the Parsonage House; and 'tis well known which way old Dugdale's snout snuffs the wind! He will admit them thereby.'

Others replied that the doctor could not; that the London Captain had cleared out his Papistical den, and put it in the keeping of Gibby-Hook the bellows-blower, with men on whom he could depend. Then a score voices demanded, 'Where was the Captain?' 'Where was Tubal Bromycham?' And a number of women began screaming that all was lost; that they and their children would all be destroyed and massacred by the bloodthirsty cavaliers, and a general lamentation arose

over the folly of their townsmen for placing them all in so dangerous a position.

Dorothy's appearance was consequently at no very propitious moment; and she herself began to grow a little alarmed at the accumulating signs of her unpopularity.

'I'll warrant me,' said a haggard, frightened-looking woman glaring at her from the mob, 'she knows better than any of us what downpour is coming upon us! To call herself so worthy a master tradesman's daughter, yet go a-gadding and eavesdropping against us to the old tyrant of Aston! Hiss her, I say; and an it were not for her worthy father's sake, I would put my ten-tacks in her peach face, forsooth, to some purpose!'

And vigorously setting an example which was extensively followed among the members of the fair sex, the air became all of a whizz-fizz with the demonstration.

Dorothy herself quailed a little, and the armourer turned very pale as he addressed the crowd in deprecation.

'Peace, good folks; my daughter meant it all for the best,' he said. 'You yourselves talk now of how better a thing it were to have kept peace with Aston, if the assault comes thence.'

'It is not so, armourer,' said a loud commanding voice at this moment. 'It is the King's nephew, with some score of wearied horse, sniffing like a cat at a well-wired birdcage round the town. Let us keep steady on our perches, and Grimalkin cannot harm us. But, fie! have we a flock of geese turned out among us, by this noise?'

'They are angry at my daughter, Captain Cromwell,' said Firebrace, 'though I wot not well what harm she can have done in the case. I will take her to Tubal at the Moat House.'

'You will not find him there; the over-eager youngster has sent me word that he has led his men to the chains at the end of Worcester Street, where the King's men and they are angrily staring at each other, and would have my leave to make an onset out of the barriers, which I shall by no means yield to. Let the girl go to my quarters at the Black Boy. She will find her friend Dame Cooper there, and others of the like thinking, or prating at least, and who do so rail at me betimes as almost to put me past my patience.'

'I will take her there.'

'No; you are needed at the Guildhall to hearten some of the white-livered cravens of your town-governors, who stammer already the traitor's word "Surrender!" Whereto I answer, "NEVER" while I have breath to shout "No!" All good people, shout with me "No surrender! no surrender!" Do you hear? They are talking of surrender in the Town Hall ere we are even so much as asked to yield. No surrender, boys! If the boys yelp, the men will soon bark.'

The courageous bearing and the determined accents of Cromwell produced their effect on the easily excited and directed emotions of the populace. 'No surrender! no surrender!' passed immediately from a murmur of repetition to a real uproar of vehement resolve.

'Go and tell the Town Council what the people say, armourer, and mean I' said Cromwell, evidently well pleased with this exhibition. 'I

will bring them beneath the windows of the Guildhall, if it needs confirmation ; and meanwhile trust your maiden to my care, and I will see her safely bestowed.'

The armourer, agitated with the noise and confusion, assented to the order rather than request he received ; and passing also with a strange implicitness under the dominion of this master-spirit of the stormy times, moved as if under the influence of a spell at once towards the Guildhall, in New Street, leaving his darling daughter under the stranger's protection without a word of unwillingness or dissatisfaction.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

EDGBASTON BARRIER.

'THIS way with me, my bonny lass. Why do you pause a-tiptoe ? Methinks you are safer in than out of custody. Hear you not what the people murmur ?' said Captain Cromwell, thus left in charge.

'I heed them not,' returned Dorothy, disdainfully. 'I did never set much store by the utterances of such rank breaths. But I would rather go with you on and see the fight than be shut up with some old woman in a tobacco-smoking inn. Moreover, I like not a companion who lodges there—the Aston bastard fellow. Let me go with you, sir.'

'I do not purpose there shall be any close encounter with the enemy, girl, where I go. But what misliking have you against worthy Master Grimsorwe, which, the Lord defend you, truly he so amply returns ?' inquired Cromwell, with some interest and more surprise in his accents.

Dorothy reflected, and suppressed the answer that rose readily enough to her tongue. It would not do, she thought, to let the Parliament Captain know how thoroughly she was in the secret of his private understanding with his pretended prisoner.

'Let a woman's reason suffice you, sir captain, that I like not the man because I *like him not*,' she answered, rather petulantly. 'But if my betrothed is where you are going, I have the better right to follow ; more especially if you purpose to keep him from a fray.'

'True enough,' said Cromwell ; and after a moment's further reflection he motioned leave to Dorothy to accompany him, and took the direct route to the now wide and commodious road to Edgbaston. In those days, though still one of the widest streets of the town, it was comparatively narrow, and only broadened to a space where it joined the Parsonage and Dudley Street, on the outer skirts of the Birmingham of 1642. Here particular skill had accordingly been required and applied in the fortification of the town. A deep and broad ditch had been dug, and a complete network of chains fixed across the street on strong staples, to the height of ten or eleven feet, so as effectually to bar the entrance. The position was further secured by the Parsonage House, which, like the Moat House, had a wide ditch around it, and was occupied by some of the most determined of the town rabble, under Sisypheus the bellows-blower.

Within these chains Tubal and a select band of young fellows, nearly

all well armed, were drawn up in a kind of battle array ; and beyond them appeared the gleaming cuirasses and snorting steeds of Prince Rupert's checked and amazed dragoons, the latter exchanging the most insulting ribaldry and defiance with the townspeople, goading and urging upon them not to sneak like rats behind a wainscot, but come out fairly into the open field, and pit manhood against manhood in a fray !

Tubal in particular appeared to be exasperated by these remarks, and the scornful urging and imprecations of the leader of the enemy—a tall and powerful young man in bright armour, with a yellow plume in his hat.

‘I thought you English had been men of better mettle than to skulk thus behind mounds of earth ! There is a better report of you in the Rhineland, where I was born and bred. Are ye deer-parked in an inclosure, and dare not wager your horns against such lean, wearied hounds as we ?’ this officer was saying, doubtless hoping to provoke what he considered a senseless rabble to the usual rash displays of such bodies of men. Tubal had indeed clearly some difficulty to restrain his men, and no sooner caught sight of Cromwell than he eagerly demanded leave to cast down the chains, and sally forth to punish the insulting foe.

‘But for what cause, think you, then, have we been at the pains to place them where they are ?’ returned the Parliament officer drily. ‘No ; your undisciplined fellows cannot fairly face this picked horse of the King’s. Let them weary themselves with bawling, and so depart. Had I my own troopers in hand now, whom I do so hourly expect, I should take a pleasure, too, in dusting yonder braggart young gentleman’s lion’s hide ! But as it is, I command you all, on the obedience you have promised me, in nowise to stir out of the defences.’

And Cromwell remained fixed in this resolve, in spite of every entreaty on Tubal’s part to the contrary ; laughing heartily at the numerous abortive attempts now made by the Prince and his cavaliers to leap the ditch to the barriers. Horse and rider rolled over repeatedly in those efforts ; until at last, after a consultation among the officers, the Prince drew off his dragoons in futile wrath, and resumed his eager rounds of the well-secured town, like a dog at a rolled-up hedgehog.

A report shortly after arrived that the cavaliers had drawn off altogether in the direction of Aston Hall ; and then, for the first time, Cromwell, whose mind had been entirely absorbed in the military proceedings, noticed that Dorothy Firebrace no longer appeared at the place in the rear where he had left her on his advance to the point of attack. But Richard Grimsorwe was at his side, with a dark and scowling face,

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BLACK BOY AND WOOLPACK.

‘How, master lawyer ?’ said Cromwell, attentively surveying Grimsorwe’s glum visage ; ‘your looks also are very secretly of our faction—all curds

and whey ! And yet you have likely seen and heard how clearly the Lord has owned the work in hand, how well we are rid of the cavaliers this first brush, which is of infinite consequence to further good success.'

'But I am glad of it, and of other good news I bring. And you must needs confess you owe some part of this to me, who assured you the King could send no great ordnance against you, which would speedily open a way through your chains and palisades,' replied Grimsorwe, striving to alter the expression of his countenance, with but slight success.

'Nay, man, it was better as it was—all scowl and gloom. It twists your nature out of all resemblance to humanity to try and smile,' Cromwell observed, with the grim humour in which he was not deficient. 'What ailed you, I say again, but now?'

'The woman who stood at gaze with you ere you left her at the road-head,' returned Grimsorwe, seemingly anxious to remove the impression that his heart was not truly with the cause he clandestinely served, '*she* passed me with an insolent flouting of contempt and misliking, and with her nose in the air as if a dung-cart were rumbling by her ; whereby I plainly perceived Mistress Firebrace owes me some deadly spite for causing her to be detained at Aston ; and as her fancy evidently runs altogether in the same strain with her paramour's, my brother, I marvel you——'

'Peace there, peace there, good bastard Richard ! I will not suffer such a word to be used of the maiden without better or worse cause than any I have yet understood, saving your malice against your well-born brother and any of his favourers. Armourer Firebrace is a worthy stander-up, and as hearty in the cause as any man of substance can well be expected to be, in one put to the edge of untried steel,' Cromwell sharply interrupted.

'I will prove my words at some fitter season, Master Cromwell. Yet I must needs repeat, I do marvel you suffer one who has shown herself an adverse and intelligencer of your enemies, to spy about in the streets at pleasure, and report, most likely, the liberty that is accorded me.'

'Well, I marvel yet more you should take it on so public an occasion, Master Grimsorwe,' returned Cromwell.

'I was anxious of the event. Had matters gone adverse with you of the town, I purposed to speed to Deritend, and make my brotherly peace with Edward by guiding the cavaliers thither to his rescue,' returned Grimsorwe, with a smile of some darker internal consciousness than ridicule of the hypocrisy he declared.

But Cromwell's sagacity was not so easily thrown at fault. 'Was it so, Master Bastard?' he remarked ; 'or to set the Anabaptists and the mob on your brother's destruction, as the cause of the ruin of their town? What for else have you these several times haunted in at the Black Chapel, out Bordesley way, and showed yourself so mightily edified with the ravings of the man with the hook?'

The Black Chapel was the designation of a miserable deserted barn, partially fallen into ruin, in the fields now covered with the haggard suburb of Bordesley, where the wildest fanatics of Birmingham assembled to discuss and expound the doctrines of their sect ; and being a wooden

erection, patched over at some time with coal-tar against the weather, its outward aspect well vindicated the epithet it had received, to the eye, while the opinions broached and propagated in the enclosure were supposed to merit it yet more in a moral sense.

Grimsorwe looked rather confused. 'I had a religious curiosity, mayhap, for the mind is much betossed on its first voyaging on the sea of faith; and, besides, did half expect that one of my father's servants, who frequents that devil's synagogue, as they call it at Aston, would bring me some whispering thence,' he replied. 'But it is all of little consequence now, since the great enterprise I pointed out to you fails,' he continued, in a grievously disappointed tone. 'The King is surely safe at Nottingham, with his cavalry at Aston.'

'Why, man, man! what could I possibly do more than I have done? Have I not provided for the safety of the town until relief can come from the Earl of Essex; to whom I have sent a full account of what is intended, and an earnest entreaty that he would forward, at utmost haste, support to us in the success of the design, which I myself will undertake the instant the troopers, whom I hourly expect, of my own command arrive?' Cromwell replied, with angry vehemence.

'Well, then, sir, I am confident there are news for you from my Lord of Essex at the Black Boy; for even as I sallied forth, a gentleman, who announced himself bearer of despatches from *his Excellency*, had touched there on a spent horse. And who should *his Excellency* be but the earl who commands the Parliament's army in chief?'

'Aye, forsooth,' replied Captain Cromwell; and he seemed struck by the intelligence; for although it was not certain at that moment that the cavaliers would halt at Aston, and cease their useless rounding of the town, he declared his intention to return at once to his quarters, where the messenger was announced to be found.

Grimsorwe accompanied him, apparently aware that dissimulation of his intimacy with the Parliament chief was not likely to deceive the eyes for which it had been assumed. And it was this circumstance that produced an exclamation to be recorded from one of the parties in a small group of guests assembled at the Black Boy Inn, in the hostess's private parlour.

'What manner of doubt, now, Mistress Mellons, of my well-witted god-child's true report? Here they come along, like Old Nick and his fiery shadow!' said a remarkably tall virago-visaged woman, who was sitting at a window whence she commanded a full view of the length of the outer street and back of St. Martin's Church.

'Troth, I have been all along suspecting as much; for though I never lodged a prisoner before, I guessed there should be some restraint exercised towards them, Madam Cooper, and this was at none,' returned the landlady of the Black Boy to her distinguished inmate, who had become such since Tubal Bromycham had taken possession of the Moat House. 'But for the young maiden to venture on such a hazard as she proposes, to learn what is really astir between them, and even to so good an intent as the King's service and Master Holte's, methinks is a tempting of Providence. The Lord only knows what they may mean by the law

military, which we all heard bawled by Accepted Clavers, at the market cross, this blessed daybreak.'

'The risk is altogether mine, good Mistress Mellons, and I am very willing to it ; for all you say assures me there is some devilish plot working against the young gentleman placed under my father's safe charge, whose blood will doubtless be required at our hand chiefly,' replied the sweet, musical-ringing, but resolute accents of Dorothy Firebrace. 'Give me my way, good friends, for once, and let us lose no time in locking me in the pantry cupboard of the captain's living chamber, where I can hear all that shall pass between him and Grimsorwe and this newly-arrived Londoner, until you call him down to his dinner-mess. Not a long hazard, by the savoury scent of the roast from the kitchen.'

'Truly not,' said a personage, whose short, stout limbs, overweening paunch, and jolly rosy gills, trimmed all round with white hair and beard, would have suited well for a Falstaff ; and he sniffed the air with visible relish, as he added, 'Woe's my life, to think that it is come to this with the high bailiff of Birmingham town, that he must wait for broken victuals from a fanatic dragoon's table to make his meal.'

'And scarce a full one then either, Master Cooper,' sympathised Mistress Mellons. 'The man eats with a live wolf in his stomach to go snacks ; and their good morning's work, with a wanion to it, will put them in better appetite than ever. But what is to be helped when the country-folks are so panick'd at the cavaliers ? There was scarce a basket of eggs or butter at the market cross yesterday, and beeves and mutton were as things unknown before the flood. Faithful Moggs himself remarked on it as a judgment ; there never was so clean a shambles in Birmingham since the world began. I saw it with my own eyes ; not a gutter red in it. Only I took the *judgment* my own way. But the captain is provident, and had me store him in his provender for weeks at once when the troubles began.'

'But he leaves the key of his store-room with you, mistress, and will not suspect an eaves-dropper in anywise among his salt pork and loaf flour,' rejoined Dorothy, with earnest beseechingness in her tones. 'I shall incur little or no risk, and may do much good.'

'Truly, there are air-holes at which a body may conveniently listen,' replied the landlady of the Black Boy. 'And he laughed merrily himself when he put in the two pickled geese for Sundays ; for, says he, "I mind not *their* listening, and *they* mind not the gallows !" which I could not understand at the time, till I heard it cried that whoever fetched or carried any tidings to the enemies out of the town, by the law martial, should dangle at a rope's end. How will you abide that risk, Mistress Dorothy ?'

'That and any other ! only we must lose no time ; they are at hand !' exclaimed Dorothy, impatiently.

'Troth are they, fair mistress ; but it goes against me, somehow, to risk it, though I am as true as another, I think, to the right cause,' humanely persisted Mistress Mellons. 'What say you, Madam Cooper ? she is your god-child ; would you have her run the risk ?'

'By George and Dragon, would I ; and run it myself a thousand times, stood I not too tall on my haunches, unless I could bend like a

clasp-knife in the cupboard ; and, besides, am rather hard of my hearing to strange voices,' returned Dame Cooper ; adding, with a supremely contemptuous glance at her husband, ' Were John Cooper here a man in his soul as he is in his body, we were not to seek for one to incur a worser risk !'

' Who—I, good wife ?' said the high bailiff, waking from a depth of reverie that might almost have been reckoned a slumber. ' What were you saying ? Is it next Sunday ? Your pardons, fair women ; I was thinking of those same salt geese, and what a rare savoury dish they will make, over-baking a good batter pudding, a foot deep in the pan ! But what talk you of me, wife, when you know as certainly as twice four I should fall asleep the moment they began buzzing and fuzzing their plots through the keyhole, and so betray all by my snoring ? for well ye wot I do snore like a grampus when I am much aweary with clapper-claw.'

' Speak neither to him nor of him ; had it not been for his dastardice I had held the Moat House until rescue, as sure as my name is, to my disgrace, Cooper !' lamented the high bailiff's dispossessed lady. ' And to think that a rascal smith should now pretend to be lord of Birmingham ! Odd's my life ! and set up his apron, bedaubed with colours, for a banner ! Pardon, Dorothy, darling ; but I wot well you hold no more by any of these traitors than myself. Let her have her way, good Mistress Mellons ; no great harm can fall of it to Armourer Firebrace's daughter and Tubal Bromycham's betrothed.'

Thus authoritatively counselled, earnestly importuned by Dorothy, and urged by a feeling of curiosity on her own part—by no means the weakest of her incentives—the landlady yielded assent ; and, selecting one from a mighty bunch of keys at her girdle, invited Mistress Firebrace to follow her up a flight of very narrow stairs, which conducted to the upper floors of the house.

Bailiff Cooper stared after the courageous girl in amazement.

' I would not run her risk for all Birmingham and Deritend to boot ; and you her godmother, dame, and counsel it !' was his commentary.

' You are good for nothing but to drink wort or old ale. John Cooper ; but look that you talk not in your cups to-night, or I will let the King's men know, when they are masters again, what a faint heart you showed throughout in his gracious service ; and mayhap then the loss of your crown place will not be the worst that shall betide you thereupon.'

Like other people in a passion, Dame Cooper did not consider she was likely to do herself quite as much mischief as the object of her indignation.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MAJOR MONK.

MEANWHILE the fearless armourer's daughter unflinchingly followed on Mistress Mellons's footsteps to a small, very low-roofed upper chamber, furnished as what we should now call a sitting-room. At one end of

this was a very narrow little bedroom, where Captain Cromwell slept, and on a side of that a projection, forming a jutting triangle with the wall, used as a cupboard, or wardrobe perhaps, at pleasure.

There were two holes like eyes at the upper part of this door, to allow of some ventilation within. But the scope of the interior was so very limited, and occupied by provision stores, that slender as was the Deritend maiden's form, she found some difficulty in ensconcing herself in the recess. Such, however, was the purpose in which she persevered, assisted by Mistress Mellons, who thrust certain of the stores back, and contrived for her a not very uncomfortable standing place, on the whole, on the top of a firkin of flour.

This elevation would enable Dorothy to put her ear to the air-holes ; and finding she would persist in the business, Mistress Mellons only further cautioned her against the danger of oversetting anything, and exhorted her, 'for her life, not to breathe,' and complied at last with her desire to be shut and locked in the recess, ably providing herself, also, with a measure of meal, to account for her presence, if need were, in the upper room, and muttering to herself that she could easily manage to lose the key, if any suspicion arose, the landlady of the Black Boy and Woolpack descended to her bar at the very moment when Cromwell and Grimsorwe, making their way slowly through the eager questioning throngs of the townspeople, re-entered the inn.

It was doubtless a considerable hazard Dorothy now incurred, and perhaps not quite in accordance with very nice notions of above-board play in the game ; but so convinced was she of some deep, dark treachery at work against the safety of her lover, that Dorothy could not deem herself to blame in counteracting such by any needful underhand movement on her own part. She was convinced that everything was to be dreaded, from observing the freedom of action enjoyed by the pretended prisoner, when he made his appearance at Edgbaston Barrier ; and the malice and fury flaming on his countenance when, having had the impudence to address her quite familiarly on their meeting, she turned away from him in scorn, struck the conviction deeper into her mind.

Unwilling to abide any further display of his audacity, which might provoke personal reprisals, Dorothy then determined to withdraw from the spot and return to Deritend. But a thought occurred to her on the way home, that Grimsorwe's absence allowed her a good opportunity to go and see her friend Dame Cooper, at the Black Boy ; if possible, to put her up to some watchfulness over the traitor's proceedings ; and accordingly she had made her way to the inn, and there not only diffused her own suspicions, but had them increased by other circumstances which had come to the cognisance of the expelled royalist bailiff's lady and her entertainer.

The chief of these was that a messenger had arrived from London, who demanded urgently to see Captain Cromwell, and not finding him there, had left the house to look for him at once.

This person was apparently of the military profession, and probably of some rank, from his authoritative demeanour and gentlemanly attire, though he arrived in a plain travelling garb, and without attendance, in the town. His name was stated to be Monk. Dorothy was seized

with dread, upon this intimation, that this stranger was the bearer of some decision on her lover's fate ; and she was determined, at every hazard, to ascertain what.

Neither had she long to wait in her concealment ere light seemed likely to be thrown on her perplexity. With a rapid beating of the heart she distinguished the sound of approaching voices, and in a few moments Cromwell evidently tramped into the apartment, in the heavy jack-boots he had assumed, with a full upper suit of armour, for the warlike action of the day ; and she knew that Grimsorwe continued his accompaniment, from hearing his voice at the same time. 'They of the house have misdirected the gentleman—purposely, to my thinking—to the defences Aston way ; but he will soon find out his mistake and return,' he was remarking. 'Know ye the man, sir ?'

'Not I, indeed ; but he leaves word, I hear, that he is a major in the Earl of Essex's own body-guard, which is, I take it, of superior rank to mine ; so, belike, the earl has taken it upon him to supersede me here, for, I misdoubt me, he is one of those lukewarm, half-hearted professors in the cause, which a great peer of large estate is likely to prove,' said Cromwell, evidently very peevishly.

'In that case, what shall you do, captain ? Yield the fruits of your great courage and enterprise to another ?' returned Grimsorwe, almost tauntingly in his accents.

Cromwell made no reply at first to the observation ; but Dorothy had little doubt it produced some displeasing effect, for she heard the heavy boots crunch and crackle as the captain strode vexedly up and down the chamber.

'What shall I do ? What *can* I do, Master Grimsorwe ?' he then answered gloomily enough ; but, after another brief interval, resuming with singular fervour and exultation, 'Yet what boots to ask counsel of a fellow-worm of the earth ? The Lord will open me a way, and guide me thereupon. He who took David from a-minding of silly sheep, to set him up as a leader of battle ; yea, as a king and ruler over all Israel ; the Lord's will be done, whatever it be. The mightiest of us all are but as chaff before a strong wind when the Wilier willeth aught. And I do feel myself called upon, as by an inner voice, to kneel and ask of Him guidance over what is to follow. Truly, He hath been a gracious Lord to me this day, and removed all terror from my heart, which I looked to experience, of a surety, the first time I beheld the naked edge of the sword. Oft I have heard it said that the greatest and boldest of after-commanders have had their knees loosened with dread, in their first experiences of blood and death ; though of a truth neither, through good precaution, hath befallen us to-day.'

And, greatly to the unseen auditor's vexation, as interrupting more profitable discourse between the parties, she became aware that the Parliament Captain had fallen on his knees, and was pouring forth a series of devotional ejaculations and entreaties for enlightenment direct from above. Nor did Grimsorwe himself venture to interrupt the paroxysm of prayer until Cromwell ceased of his own accord, and arose, apparently wiping his face, for he observed, 'This wrestling with the Lord in prayer is a hard though sweet exercise. Sooth, how the sweat pours from my

skin, as an I were a reaper on a hot day ! Much more of this will make me light enough for the saddle on my purposed midnight gallop to Nottingham.'

The expression struck alarmingly on Dorothy's hearing. Meanwhile, Grimsorwe's thoughts seemed to be running in another channel. 'They said below the messenger's name is Monk. Can it be the man of that name, a lieutenant-general in the King's army in Ireland, who was committed to the Tower just before I left London ? From all I heard of him, he was of a sufficiently time-serving disposition to change his politics rather than remain in disgrace and durance. May it not well be he ?'

Precisely as he spoke, Mistress Mellons entered, escorting a stranger, presumably, from his soldierly and commanding figure and manner, the officer from London.

He was, apparently, in the prime of his years ; his countenance was handsomely featured and gentlemanly, and stamped by an expression of great though quiet reserve and gravity, not usually observable in men of his age and profession. His demeanour was that of a person accustomed to the good society of his time, full of calm self-possession and nerve ; his language and tones gentle and conciliatory, though not unmixed with a certain inflexibility and composure of resolve in the bland and affable accent that greatly puzzled the hearer's judgment.

Dorothy could see little of this, even if she had hazarded putting her eye to the air-hole ; which she scarcely did, lest some betraying gleam should light to detection. But the first utterances of the stranger's voice gave some notion of these other personal belongings. He began to speak the moment Mistress Mellons had introduced him as 'Major Monk.' But, doubtless, as an encouraging hint to the hidden witness, the landlady interrupted by adding, 'Your honour's dinner wants but another turn or two of the spit, so I do trust no long delay needs be made to mar good meat.'

'So trust I also, good wife, for though my stomach be ready enough for my meat (I thank my good morning's work for my appetite), cinders are hard of digestion for an ostrich,' Cromwell replied, rather sharply. 'But as this gentleman I hope will partake with me, he will hardly make his business, either, too tedious. From London, you say, sir !'

'I have not said so, sir, but it is not the less true, and from the Earl of Essex, his Excellency's head-quarters in the city, sir,' replied the stranger officer, politely.

'Head-quarters in the Tower, did I hear you say ?' returned Captain Cromwell.

Major Monk was evidently a little disconcerted. But he answered quietly, 'You have heard, I see, of my incarceration therein, Master Cromwell ; but like other no worse people I have espied the error of my ways, in the time and solitude so afforded me, and have offered my sword to the Parliament, which hath been graciously pleased to accept it ; whence it follows I am here with this letter from the noble Earl of Essex's own hand, in answer to one duly received and weighed from yourself. But the subject, both ways, is of a secret nature, unless this

gentleman is as innermost as your own bosom in the matter,' Monk concluded, with a visible expression of warning and wonder in his look.

'Far from it,' said Richard Grimsorwe, though with inner reluctance, no doubt. 'I am the captain's prisoner merely; most kindly entreated, it is true, and as such withdraw myself.'

He suited the action to the word, while Cromwell took the letter offered, and putting it in the hollow of his left hand, broke the large and pompous seal into a hundred pieces with a stroke by the other. Major Monk raised his eyebrows, but made no remark. Nor did Cromwell make any apology for proceeding at once to read the contents; very slowly and deliberately, and evidently more than once to himself.

During this perusal it would have been a singular study for any person acquainted with the future destinies of these two men—one the overthrower, and the other the restorer, of the English Monarchy—to have analysed their respective countenances. Singular but vain; for neither of them betrayed a glimpse of the thoughts or emotions possessing them, under each other's scrutiny; of which each was vaguely conscious, without any direct encounter with their eyes.

'Are you aware of the contents of this letter, Major Monk?' said Cromwell at last, deliberately refolding the missive, and asking the question in a very commonplace and ordinary tone.

'My instructions are simply to deliver it, Captain Cromwell,' was the cautious reply.

'Well, sir, you have executed your commission; but as for my part, I purpose to make it no secret to the entire nation anon of the strange balk contrived for me in a great enterprise, whereby a torrent of blood might be spared this people and kingdom. I would have you take notice that by this writing I am peremptorily ordered to abandon my plan to surprise the person of the King; leave this well-meaning but scarcely harnessed town at once, to whatever may befall it, in consequence of its brave adoption of my counsel; and draw, with all my raised forces in the three confederate counties of Beds, Cambridge, and Huntingdon, to the new rendezvous of the Parliament army at Northampton.

'Such are his Excellency's well-advised commands, I believe,' replied Major Monk, sedately. 'And I must add that, far from admiring the violence of your zeal in these affairs, Captain Cromwell, the Earl of Essex is sorely dismayed and horrified at the bare notion of so disloyal and insolent a design upon the sacred person of the King, which his Excellency's own fullest commission merely authorises him to set free from the hands of the Papists and malignants surrounding him, and place at liberty to hear honest counsels, delivered with all reverence, from his loving people and Parliament.'

'So 'tis worded in all the decrees and ordinances, sir,' replied Cromwell, with a laugh that clearly startled the cautious messenger. 'But deem you we shall be arraigned for life and forfeiture of goods, in these silken terms, should it fall to his Majesty's behest to require the meaning of these acts of ours by judges and juries of his appointment? It is

a strange, it is a marvellous thing how this delusion of words possesses men's minds! Well, but, sir, have you done your mission now, or is more to follow? Do you come to take military sway and office among the good people here when I depart to the rendezvous named, in obedience to my orders?

'Of a surety, no; my Lord of Essex would never think to set an officer of my service and standing at the head of an undisciplined insurgent mob, though it has not been thought fit to entrust me with so high command in the Parliament's service as I held in his Majesty's,' returned the major, with evident disgust.

'Well, and in good truth, you are not the kind of instrument to the work: you have served too regularly, sir, I take it, for the business, which fits us poor half civilians better. But how forwardly and trustfully these worthy poor souls of Birmingham have put themselves under the ploughshare; or, rather, have suffered me to place them! The King's cavalry already at Aston! It yearns my bowels to think that I must leave them to disasters I shall have been the main instrument to bring upon them? Northampton! Why Northampton? It is infinitely too remote for what should be the grand purpose now, to fall upon the malignants, tooth and nail, before they can gather to any strength round the standard at Nottingham! Why Northampton, say I?'

He paused in the indignant query, seemingly for a reply. But Major Monk only made the cold observation, 'In the camps where I was bred, no soldier ever made questions of his general's will and decision, whatever his subordination; but above all, no officers, Captain Cromwell, of such subaltern degree as ours.'

'May only a major-general, or lieutenant-colonel, hold his commander a traitor or an ass, Major Monk? If so, I did never so much long for preferment as at this moment!' returned Cromwell with startling suddenness and vehemence; though he burst into a laugh the moment after, and added, 'But the Earl's Excellency naturally forgets not that he is a stream of the fountain of honour, which, if it be choked and dammed—what am I saying? My dinner, sir, will smoke on the board anon, and I trust to see your ride has appetised you as well as our tramping to and fro in this town to-day hath ourselves, when you have had some space to dust yourself.'

The major now politely complimented Captain Cromwell on the skilful manner in which he had rendered an unvalled town impervious to a cavalry attack; but with something of sarcasm and reflection in his tones that did not escape Cromwell.

'Nay, ours is but rough soldiery, sir; yet it served the turn. You had the skilfullest of our trained military at Cadiz and at the Isle of Rhé with you, where I think I have heard you served; but I know not that it fared so much better with you there!'

'In truth did it not,' returned the major, with evident vexation, 'but we were under ill captaincy—silk and velvet courtiers, who had never smelt powder, put to our rule!'

'Were you of *rank* to form any judgment in such matters *then*?' returned Cromwell, demurely. 'I should say, by the reckoning of

your present beard, you would but carry a pair of colours at the Isle of Rhé !

‘But I have served since in the Low Countries, and in Ireland during the horrid, hellish massacre there by the Papists,’ returned Monk, rather betrayed from his wonted equanimity by the retort.

‘In Ireland it was, then, no doubt, you acquired so profound a science in the salvation of the weaker numbers by the virtues of spade and pickaxe, that you speak so critically—which is to say scornfully—of our achievements here with the same?’ returned Cromwell. And satisfied with the snubs he had thus administered to the self-sufficiency of the regular officer, he added cheerfully, ‘But we own ourselves poor tyros in the sport, and hope to show to more advantage in an assault on roast beef and batter pudding mine hostess has nigh in readiness for us. And I can also recommend her ale and her strong waters. I say nothing of her wines, which, perhaps, better consort with gentlemanly liking.’

‘I am beholden to you for the invitation, Captain Cromwell. We can be good trencher-fellows, if nothing else,’ replied the major, rather sarcastically, both in words and tone. ‘But I have not quite done my messaging : there is an order from the Committee of Safety in London regarding the disposal of the prisoners you announce yourself to have made and hold in this town.

Dorothy’s heart took a quick flutter at the words, and it was with difficulty she hindered the pant from being audible on the exterior of her place of concealment. It may be imagined if she listened with eagerness to what ensued.

‘The prisoners !’ exclaimed Cromwell, evidently taking the second paper with avidity. ‘But I asked no instructions concerning them ! I had intentions of my own. What is said here ? That I am to release Richard Grimsorwe forthwith, and despatch Edward Holte, under safe custody, to the Gatehouse Prison of Westminster, to abide trial for high treason and other his misdemeanours, in taking action against the high ordinances of Parliament ?’

‘It is so determined, sir ; the committee is bent on making at once an early and terrible example, to deter other gentlemen from such audacity,’ replied Major Monk, adding, with a suppressed sigh, ‘They meant the like against me, for my refusal to yield Nantwich to the Parliament’s summons, had I not made my peace by submission.’

‘That will never Edward Holte ! And so they will take the lad’s comely head from his shoulders,’ said Cromwell. ‘Hard measure that, and never meant by me. Should it be ? I did speak for the other, and forward his letters to St. John and Master Pym ; but this is a bloody way to make bastards lawful inheritors !’

‘I have obeyed my orders, it is for you to obey yours now, Captain Cromwell,’ said Monk, calmly. ‘But I know not why a simple gentleman’s head should be so rooted to the stem, when the noble Strafford’s has rolled on the block, and my Lord Archbishop Laud’s is so loose it needs but a waft of the axe to sever it !’

‘Truly, truly, sir, yet it mislikes me enough. The youth is a fair youth, and we have taken him at some unhandsome advantages. But what other men do is none of our doing. We wash our hands of the

young man's blood, when once we are quit of him from our own restraint. Yet I could be sorry, too. But when no choice is left us? What power have I, in either of these matters, to withstand the decrees of my betters, were I so inclined? What power, I say?

By a strange coincidence, even as Cromwell uttered the exclamation, in which indignation seemed to contend with some other restraining influence, a trampling sound became audible in the street below the inn, leading from the Bull Ring.

'Horsemen in Birmingham! what means this?' exclaimed the captain, evidently startled: and as clearly by the clatter of his boots, he rushed to the window.

What Dorothy Firebrace, helplessly imprisoned, would have given to have passed the deliberate and measured footstep of Major Monk, after the organiser of the defence of Birmingham!

She thrust her ear in strained anxiety to the hole in the store-cup-board; but the reverse of a relief was it to her agonised attention when she heard Cromwell exclaim, 'I was praying in my soul for an answer to my thought, and as the Lord liveth, they are here! My troop of God-fearing, man-despising horse are here, and plenty of armour ready for their casing and wielding! The God of Sabaoth—the Lord God of Armies be praised! Now can I speak with a straight back to any questioning!'

'What mean you, Captain Cromwell?' said Monk, stiffly enough now, indeed.

'Captain Cromwell! I tell you I feel nigh a major-general, or a lieutenant-colonel at the least, when I look at these stout fellows, I mean. Did I not tell you, erewhile, we should have beef and custard to our dinner?'

'I do not understand you, sir,' said Major Monk, and it is very likely he did not.

'Captain, your troopers have arrived?' exclaimed an eagerly excited third voice at this moment, which Dorothy instantly recognised with a shudder.

'Are they so, Master Grimsorwe? In good time; but we are under sudden orders for Northampton, now,' said Cromwell, handing him the Earl of Essex's letter, and adding to Monk, 'I would have as many witnesses as I can that 'tis by no fault of mine this great opportunity is lost.'

'You are strangely communicative, captain,' said Monk, in a displeased tone, and Dorothy had little doubt he withdrew upon the word, from the tone in which the subsequent dialogue proceeded, without any intervention on his part.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE IRONSIDES.

'So, then, at the very moment when success seems to ask but the plucking, you abandon the enterprise in obedience to this wavering

Earl's commands?' said Grimsorwe, with disappointment and vexation in every accent.

'What can I else? You see how peremptory they are?—how all aid is refused to this believing, zealous town, save information that Parliament commissioners will be sent down at convenient speed?' said Cromwell; and Grimsorwe burst into such a raging of disappointed expressions as fully revealed to Dorothy Firebrace the purposes he had cherished. But she was unprepared for what followed on the first cessation of this outburst, when Cromwell, receiving back his commander's letter, suddenly tore it into a thousand shreds!

'I will not keep this evidence,' he said. 'If I fail, it will but further sink me; if I succeed, who shall dare to question me on disobedience to such orders? My men have ten hours to rest and arm them till midnight, and at midnight we will commence our gallop to Nottingham.'

An undertoned but perfectly distinct hurrah burst from Richard Grimsorwe.

'Hush, hush!' said Cromwell, probably placing his hand on the imprudent lawyer's lips. 'Yon solemn prig below will hear us else; and I know not yet whether my men would obey me against superior command. But what is this you have been a-doing with St. John and Vane? They have sent for your brother to London, to have off his head!'

There was a slight pause, and then Grimsorwe laughed a laugh which made all the blood in Dorothy Firebrace's warm veins run cold.

'You see, then, captain,' he jocosely observed, 'you were wrong to impute to me a clumsy design to have him taken off by the Anabaptist rabble!'

That was all he said. Indeed, he had little opportunity to say more, for a tramp of numerous heavy feet on the old staircase outside announced the approach, probably, of the inferior leaders of Cromwell's troop of horse, anxious to greet their commander.

It plainly appeared so to the agitated armourer's daughter, whose brain whirled with excitement, but who discerned that the room filled with a multitude of persons, whom Cromwell appeared to welcome, man by man, with the most affectionate warmth and earnestness.

'What, Richard Pride, Richard Pride! is it you, good brother, whose sweet humility reverses your name? Hewson, my brave colourman, as fresh and lively as a bridegroom at the church, after your long ride; Harrison, my bedfellow, as prayerful, I trust, as when we last saw! Ha! Lambert, mine excellent lieutenant! what progress make you in book-learning for the wars? Master Hugh Peters, whom I would call reverend chaplain, but that the name is popishly abused; how fares it with ye all, dear friends?'

'The better for your asking, worthy captain; I do never hear your voice but I feel as if I had drunk wine—sweet, not heady wine,' replied Lieutenant Lambert, always obsequious and subservient, but secretly animated by an ambition that rendered him subsequently the bitterest, though most insidious, rival of his chief.

'I am well in body, dear captain, but my soul is sick with impatience to know what you purpose with us in this long cross ride. I know it is

something of a most acceptable savour in the nostrils of the Lord ; and we heard far and near as we came how you have stirred up this sweaty, hard-worked people to a real stench of godliness ! But what is it, our Joab, what is it, that our speed must wear out our own and saddle-leathers too ?' another voice inquired.

Cromwell seemed to make no direct answer to this question. It could not be called one certainly, what Dorothy heard him rejoin, 'Is that your Bible, Master Peters, you have slung at your haversack ?'

'What should it be else, Brother Oliver ? Lo, it is my bilbo of the good fight—the best of all fights ! but I have told you I have no stomach for actual blows,' returned Master Peters.

'It was your namesake of old's fault, honest man ! He could own Christ everywhere but at the cross ; and yet Christ disowned him not for that trembling and weakness of the flesh, so good a Lord ours is ! But what I wanted of you is to open the book at a chance place, and see if you can light on any word of promise—any comforting or rebuke—in the enterprise I have on hand, but must not communicate to any until the hour of its execution.'

The chaplain readily complied, it appeared, with this demand—a strange superstition, but one in almost universal honour and vogue among those who professed the most to have cast off superstitions. For Dorothy heard a flutter of book-leaves, and then the harsh Puritanical recitation of the following very singularly apt quotation certainly :

'2 Samuel xvii. 1, 2—"Moreover, Ahitophel said unto Absalom, Let me now choose out twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue after David this night : and will come upon him while he is weary and weak handed, and will make him afraid : and all the people that are with him shall flee ; and I will smite the king only."'

'Says the Word that cannot lie even so ?' exclaimed Cromwell, snatching the book evidently with vehement excitement. 'Why, then, what care I for the ordinances of man ? So ye shall comfort your earthly Adam with the fruits and vintage of the earth, and clothe yourselves in the raiment which I have provided for you, while your horses rest a convenient season ; and then I tell you all I will lead you forth on an enterprise whereto this oracle promises the blesseddest success that ever was !'

'Against the King's troopers, who are besieging you in this town, we hear ?' inquired Peters, not by any means in the cheerfully exultant accents of a willing martyr.

'I am your commander ; you are to make no question, but follow me wheresoe'er I lead !' returned Cromwell. And the reproof was well received by the rest of the officers of the future indomitable 'Ironsides.'

'I am willing to follow you, captain, through the flames of hell, to the restoration of the Throne of Jesus !' said the darkly-musing tones of Harrison.

'I will follow you, captain, as implicitly as one born blind must follow him who leads him by the hand,' said Lambert.

'You are the pillar of fire before us in the desert,' said another of the group, in fervid accents ; 'lead on !'

'Well, but we are to dine first at least ?' said Peters, smacking his

thick lips. 'And by the scent that greeted us as we came in, should not have long to wait.'

'Go down to my landlady's great kitchen; you will find the board spread. But, hark you all, no talk before the pragmatic officer of the Earl of Essex you will likely find there. I will be with you at the shortest. Master Grimsorwe, I have a word with you.'

Grimsorwe had remained during this whole dialogue, it was evident; and Dorothy perceived he had intended to retire with the rest, had he not been detained thus alone with Cromwell.

'I had not time to tell you yet, Master Grimsorwe,' the captain now resumed, 'but the same order which transfers your brother Edward Holte a prisoner to London, directs your own immediate release. Here, therefore, is your passport out of Birmingham.'

In the pause of conversation that ensued, Dorothy then distinguished the scratching of a pen upon parchment.

Grimsorwe, it was pretty plain, received the document, but lodged a demurrer.

'I will thankfully use this, captain,' he said, 'to-morrow, when I have seen you sped on your journey, and my brother, as you call the unfeeling usurper of my birthrights, properly speeded on his way to London, under Major Monk's convoy, and that of a sufficient guard.'

'You thirst for your brother's blood, then, man?' said Cromwell, in horrified and abhorrent accents.

'My mother was of nearer kin to me, and she was drowned in a filthy cel-pond, to make Edward Holte's a lawful wife!' was the malice-burning reply.

'Horrible, horrible!' ejaculated Cromwell. 'Howbeit, we are all but as instruments in the hands of the All-Overruler! Perhaps this young man's sacrifice is needed to cement the integrity of the good town to the cause. Howbeit, I will plead for him what I may with those in authority; my cousin Hampden's honey voice shall be heard in his favour. Meanwhile, avoid my sight and presence from this time and henceforth, *fratricide*!'

As the dreadful word was pronounced, from which even Grimsorwe recoiled, so commonplace an interruption as the entrance of the landlady of the Black Boy, with a renewed summons to the Parliament Captain to dinner, occurred.

'My faith, worthy sir,' she exclaimed, 'the roast is on the board, and if you make not the better haste your men-officers will fall foul of it, and leave you as small a share as the last hound in the kennel, they look so keen and famished at the viands! Good faith, your company needs rule! There's Major Monk already smiling and making his signs over the way at Blacksmith Clarges' rantipole wife, who shames the whole neighbourhood with her bold staring and audacity—more than her husband, who is the best singer in the town, can credit it!'

'He!—that grave and solemn gentleman?' said Cromwell, laughingly. 'You must be mistaken, goodwife; but lead the way, mine hostess. I would lock the door after me, to show whoever knocks the owner's absent.'

It is probable the captain had Master Grimsorwe in his intent as he

spoke, for the latter sullenly remarked, 'I am going : forgive me if I show not so nice of my manners, hostess, but betake myself at once to my chamber, where you may send me such fragments as the *hungry dogs* leave !' and so departed. For Cromwell assented, as it seemed, without reluctance to Mistress Mellon's ready-witted saying, 'Nay, I will follow with the key ; I lack something from the stores. Out on't, are they quarrelling below, by their clamour ?'

Thinking this no unlikely possibility, Cromwell nodded, and strode out of the apartment.

Mistress Mellons then, indeed, turned the door-key—but within—and flew to the closet. She opened it, and Dorothy Firebrace fell forward senseless in her arms !

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A FUTURE DUCHESS SHOEING A HORSE.

LUCKILY there was plenty to occupy Cromwell's attention during the very considerable interval that elapsed ere Dorothy Firebrace was enabled to leave his dangerous neighbourhood.

It was some time, indeed, before she recovered sufficiently to state the reasons of her being so overcome. An almost desperate plan of counteraction had then to be arranged between her and her sympathising Royalist friends before Dorothy stole out of the back door of the inn to return to Deritend.

In the first place, Cromwell, taking no further notice for the time of his officers, turned into the street to inspect his newly arrived troopers.

These were now drawn up in a well-dressed line—scarcely a horse's head before another—in front of the Black Boy, numbering probably about eight score riders. For Cromwell had liberally interpreted the Parliament's commission to him to raise a troop of horse—his popularity in his county, and reputation as a gifted holder-forth, as well as a courageous leader, giving him the pick of its zeal and fanaticism. Indeed, he was the first to raise a body of men in the Parliament's service endowed with the proper qualities to withstand the dash and enthusiasm of the Royalist nobility and gentry, at the head of their attached and hardy rural followers.

The 'Ironsides,' under which name, derived from their good Birmingham armour, Cromwell's regiment was destined speedily to be known and feared, were nearly all men of mature age, of grave and determined aspect, and of what was styled 'sober and God-fearing demeanour ;' most of them, in truth, distinguished by a strong cast of gloom and austerity, supposed in those days to indicate depth and sincerity of religious conviction. All wore buff jerkins and high jack-boots, and were securely ensconced in what was called a *demi-pique* saddle, as if between the humps of a camel.

Cromwell was received with a deep solemn murmur, such as might greet the entrance of some reverend preacher into the pulpit, rather than by any more military sign of greeting to a commander. But it was

plainly meant for an expression of satisfaction, and as such he accepted it; only, however, by raising his hat once as a general salute. But as he walked along the line he seemed to recognise each trooper individually, and by name, and to address to every one some friendly recognition.

'Ah, brother Moses Robson, with your beast as ever—clean and bright as new-stacked barley, from your long ride! Francis Mallows, my good neighbour at Forelands, how left you the goodwife and the bairns at home? Fight-the-Good-Fight Wellesay, is it you, worthy man? and to what use hast thou put thy talent since we saw thee last? Thou wilt hear in this witnessing town that I have not buried mine in the earth! What! the good brothers Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego! ye will find yourselves anon at the gate of the fiery furnace again! Save-all Daniels, we are coming fast upon the times when the dark sayings of God you are so moiled to interpret shall be interpreted by events and fulfilments clear as the sun! But I do joy to see how well treated your poor beasts are all, and what pains have been taken, as I desired, not to override them on the last stretch from Coventry. Well, there is yet some good rest in store for you awhile; but we must be in readiness for the saddle any hour of the day or night, the enemy being so nigh at hand as he is to this poorly-fenced town. But when once ye have donned the new steel coats I have had fashioned for you, ye will be as tough in the hide as any of the King's dragoons, and we will let them see anon that we know how to play the men as well as they. How, Philip Bendle, is it you? Are you not aweary, man, for the hour?'

'Yes, captain, even as a hart panteth for the brooks long I for the battle against the foes of Christ and His covenant! But I have changed my name since I saw your honoured face, and am now re-baptised unto God into Remember-Christ-died-for-you-on-his-enemies Bendle!' returned the trooper, with a dismal turn up of a pair of gleaming eyes, that seemed meant by nature for a very different expression.

'I am glad of it, good brother, very glad of it; I trust thy heart is re-baptised, as well as thine outward framework of man. Well, thou wilt find many good brethren of thine inclining on the steeps of salvation in this town. In especial one Sisyphus, a bellows-blower—I wot not what his other name may be—who is in possession of all the illumining over yonder, among the German truth-seekers. What though in his person he be as a broken and flawed pitcher? He smells in all his pieces of the good wine he held when he was whole and sound, ere the Amalekite dashed him against the wall.'

And with a word of this kind for almost every soldier he passed, Cromwell was some time ere he reached the last of his troopers.

The inspection evidently satisfied him. 'Soh! I know not but you are in marching order at this very moment, had you your arms well delivered. Yet, fair and softly goes far. Go now, all of you, across to yonder sheds, which you see now fronting on the market-place. They are shambles at ordinary times, but I have had them well cleaned out, and abundantly furnished of forage for the refreshment of your steeds. I see you are all, as I desired, provided with full wallets of provisions.

But there is a kilderkin or two of ale ready to be tapped and rationed out to you, to moisten the salt beef and biscuit—and the town fountain for your horses. Do not overwater them, nevertheless. We may have to ride sooner than some expect. Let us be in this town, which has so freely placed herself in our hands, even as the shepherds in the midst of the flock, with the wolves prowling around. And we will have our staffs raised too. But we must put on the iron prods first ; which shall be as soon as I have myself broken my fast this day with your officers when look that ye be all in readiness to march peaceably down to that great smithery there is in the place, where I have all your new fighting gear in as good readiness to be fitted on as any Bucklersbury tailor's apparel.'

Again the solemn hum of approval passed along the ranks of the soldiery ; and the officer who had been left in charge of the men, one Cornet Hacker—who afterwards officiated, in the rank of colonel, at the execution of Charles I.—received some further private instruction from Cromwell, and gave a word of command which set the entire body in motion.

The manœuvre ordered—wheeling into line and pacing to stables—was performed with a symmetry and regularity that delighted the captain who had devoted infinite toil and study of his own to perfecting the discipline of his volunteers. He was then returning into the inn when his attention was caught by the figure of the tinker lad, Bunyan, who was standing on tiptoe, gazing with intense interest at the military display—so earnestly in fact, that he seemed to forget he carried a pot of glowing charcoal by an iron chain at his side ; suddenly now letting it fall, and giving a yell of pain as he felt a burning touch of the implement on the flesh of his naked legs.

Cromwell laughed. 'Let it be a warning to you, my lad,' he said 'lest by carelessness and remissness you touch a greater fire than this. Do you take me, boy ? Do you understand the nature of an allegory ?

'It is an *a-leg-ory*, sir, since it hath burned mine ; but I know no why you should so scoff at me !' returned the boy, passionately. 'And I did think to ask to become a trooper in your service ; but I will go to the cavaliers now rather, at Aston ?'

'Simple child ! Thou hast no gristle yet for the hard work in store for these men of mine. But the cavaliers, say you ? A soul must not be lost for a careless word ! Come to me anon, and I will explain that I meant no jeer or jibe at you by my word "allegory." Yet, stay now thou art a wanderer in highways and byways by thy calling, and of that shrewd capacity, meseems. Know you much of the country out away northwards from this, good lad ? Let us say Leicester or Ashby-de-la Zouche.'

'Every step of it, even unto *Nottingham*, and beyond !' returned the lad, with a significance that made Cromwell start.

He even seemed alarmed by the observation ; and after a pause of inner reflection said, 'Come in with me at once ; I will explain to thee my hard word. But if thou hast any meaning in thine, keep it concealed, upon thy life ! Nor care I for the rest, what the fine gentleman soldier from London may think of it. All men are equal before Christ

and these are the days of His manifestation, or the cause in which we contend is but a rotten one. Thou shalt meal with me, and with him, and all of us, begrimed and rag-clad as thou art; and he who is too great for thy presence may remove his own.'

Cromwell returned with this strange invited guest into the principal apartment of the Black Boy, where he expected to find his officers and Major Monk.

They were there in reality, but not, apparently, on very sociable terms. The officers were gathered in a group, draining ample potations of ale, at one end of the apartment, and Major Monk was sitting moodily alone in a window-sill at the other end.

Cromwell, who was in hopes that the 'regular' major must have seen and admired his troop's manoeuvres, was rather annoyed to find he had selected a window looking aslant into a dark back lane, without apparently having had the curiosity to spy out at all at the others opening on the main street leading to St. Martin's.

It was, then, rather in sarcastic rebuke for this inattention than as meaning what he said, that, on rejoining the grave and stately officer, Cromwell made the remark, 'How, Master Major, were you so taken up with ogling yonder slatternly young wench-wife shoeing the horse there, in Hog Lane, that you had no eyes for my picked yeomen riders?'

But now Major Monk himself, cold, polished, and impenetrable as marble as he usually was, blushed and started guiltily upon the word.

It is true, he replied: 'What wench-wife, captain? I see none. Nothing but a fresh-looking blacksmith boy, in a coally leather apron, grinning and hammering at a horse's heels, while his rascally, lazy, sot of a brother (is it?) sits drinking and roaring out all manner of senseless balladry on a cold anvil?' And he said this with such sedateness and settled composure of belief that Cromwell himself thought he was really mistaken, and laughed as if at the major's ignorance and lack of true observation.

'Why, you should level your spyglass at the object, Master Monk!' he returned. 'But, do you mean to tell me that, even without the affirmation of these petticoats under the grimy leathers—something of the shortest too, I grant!—you could not assure yourself that yonder full-flushed, rounded-cheeked, long, black, curly-polled, wicked, roving-eyed slut (I'll be sworn she knows we are looking at her, strike the iron rattlingly as she will!), with her teeth laughing like flakes of snow in her red, sooty lips—do you need me to tell you that yonder is Wild Moll, Blacksmith Clarges' wife, who doth the main work of the anvil, while he sings and drinks the Black Boy barrels here dry?'

'I do not need the information, sir; I concern myself nothing in the matter!' returned Major Monk, but with an air of aristocratic disdain and disgust, and turning away.

And yet, and yet! It is a sad story, but one that forms the secret inmost wheel of the great event in English history, styled the Restoration. For had not this Wild Moll proved a false Venus to her Birmingham Vulcan, and become in the course of time, and of her husband's frenzied dissipation in his abandonment, wife of General George Monk,

yet continued scorned and despised by the Puritans for her grave offence against morality—who knows whether she would have taken part with the congenially dissolute and gay Charles II. in his exile, and have used the influence of her imperious temper and beauty over her husband to enlist his powerful arm in the Stuart cause?

Wild Moll was scarcely sixteen years of age at this time, but the precocity of mechanic life, and her athletic bringing up, had matured her person even so early, and she might have been taken for a woman three or four and twenty in her Sunday clothes. In her usual working garments of black and greasy leather, wherein she exercised almost all the offices of her husband's trade—which his laziness and jovial drunkenness greatly disinclined himself to pursue—a stranger might pardonably have doubted her sex; unless, indeed, he had taken into consideration the female coquetry and lively impudence visible under all the mirth that customarily veiled Moll Clarges' ruddy complexion and saucy features, but could not the laughing provocation in her brilliant eyes and smile. Nor could the striking animal beauty of her frame, visible in the free and vigorous movements exacted by the manly tasks the young virago seemed set upon, have alluded a soldier's eye so completely, one would think, that Major Monk would have it inferred.

The unfortunate though scarcely pitiable husband himself—Blackbird Blacksmith, as he was called, from his singing propensities—was a big, strapping fellow, with a broad, rosy, drunken, merry face, decorated with a profusion of shaggy black hair and beard; good-natured enough in the main, but given to every species of low dissipation and excess known to ancient as well as modern Birmingham. And his carelessness and drunkenness doubtless contributed to make an unhappy home, and facilitate the seducer's approaches.

But this is a story, luckily, out of the range of our present narrative. It may turn away, with Major Monk, from the contemplation of the vigorous beauty and her tipsy blacksmith spouse, who sat swilling ale and rollicking out some jingling chorus to the strokes of his wife's hammer, and may follow Captain Cromwell to the dinner table, which now began to smoke with savoury viands.

A new subject of discussion, was, however, destined yet to arise between the major and the captain. And the former had certainly soon reason to look surprised when he found a tinker boy invited to join him self at the repast. Nay, the very next seat to himself was assigned to the shrinking and amazed lad, who evidently little desired the honour.

'How is this?' said Monk, gazing at the dusky apparition with anything but satisfaction. 'Do you reckon tinkers among your cadets, Captain Cromwell?'

'This is only a visitor, but one of a many sweet soul-experiences and awakenings; whereupon I think to exchange some godly seasoning for our meat,' said Cromwell sedately; but with a smile that was in truth mocking and derisive enough, he added, 'You must make up your mind not to sit altogether with gentlemen of born degree in heaven, major, and why not also on earth?'

'Not while there is another inn in the town where I may fare for no money, Captain Cromwell, out of the company of sweeps,' returned the

major, indignantly; and slightly raising his hat to the Ironside officers, he left the chamber.

'We are well rid of a tedious espial!' said Cromwell, enjoying the success of his manœuvre, and the company certainly seated themselves at much more freedom in the absence, than had seemed likely in the presence, of the aristocratic soldier.

Yet there was yet another slight interruption, besides the lengthy grace which Hugh Peters now proceeded to deliver before meat. Armourer Firebrace entered the apartment with a perplexed and anxious look. 'Where is my daughter, captain?' he demanded, without his usual deference either of manner or tone. 'I left her in your charge, and she has not returned to her home!'

Cromwell looked somewhat confused and amazed on this query. 'She gave me the slip at Edgbaston Barrier,' he replied, 'affrighted at the noise or the looks of a grim fellow upstairs, who will persist to dog at my heels. But she is safe enough—she will not venture Aston way again!—perchance at the Moat House, with her betrothed.'

Firebrace made some indignant though undertoned observation, quite unaware—as indeed were all present—that precisely at this moment Dorothy, perceiving the coast clear into the back lane, had glided out of the house; furnished, moreover, as some misdirection for the eyes of the populace, with a cloak and married woman's hood, belonging to Dame Cooper.

The armourer was then about to withdraw, when Cromwell added, in no slightly imperious tone, 'But look you, master armourer, delay not long at the Moat House, and bring Tubal Bromycham home with you, as fast as may be, to the Forge; for I am coming for the armour you have fashioned there of mine—which is fairly paid for, piece by piece—with the two hundred brave fellows who are to wear it, at my heels!'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LOVE AND LOYALTY.

DOROTHY meanwhile sped home at all possible haste to Deritend.

Joy-bells were now pealing from the steeple of St. Martin's, and the entire aspect of things had passed from gloom and despondency to the exaggeration of triumph and exultation.

The whole population of the town appeared to have poured into the streets, exchanging all manner of cheerful gossip on the great events of the day.

Every one had some wonder to relate concerning the repulse of the cavaliers, and the distinguished part which himself or his neighbours had played in it. But, above all, everybody overflowed with praises of the courageous bearing of Tubal Bromycham and his fellows. And there were not wanting some to express an opinion that nothing but the Parliament officer's over-caution had prevented the townsmen, under his leadership, from sallying forth and effecting a complete victory. Indeed, this notion was carried so far that the arrival of Cromwell's troopers

being now universally known, opinions were freely declared he had unhandsonely reserved the honours of the crowning defeat.

Dorothy Firebrace, no longer sympathising in any degree with these feelings, lent no ear to their utterance. Her experience in the morning had besides awakened her to a sense of her disfavour with her townspeople, and she knew not whether success would add to or diminish the popular disgust.

Edward Holte, on his part, awaited her return with extreme impatience, and, considering how much the safety of the young creature, who had become to him the dearest of womankind, as well as his own, were involved in all that passed, it was no wonder. Particularly as he had no means of acquiring the slightest information on the momentous progress of events, shut up as he was in a thickly-walled inclosure, at a part of the town remote from the scene of action.

Unfortunately, too, on Firebrace's return, he had overheard his anxious enquiries for his daughter, and witnessed his abrupt departure to seek for her.

All this gave reasonable ground for renewed alarm; and Dorothy's reappearance scarcely removed it. Her face was in reality too clear an index of the emotions she was suffering to reassure him. And when the young lover clasped his fair beloved to his breast, and besought her to reveal what occasioned her dismayed and horrified looks, Dorothy wept some time on his shoulder before she could reply.

But the interval of her father's absence was too precious to be wasted; and she forced herself to find words to reveal to Edward Holte the repulse of the royalists, and the dreadful information she had acquired, and by what means.

It was doubtful which astounded Edward most—the courage and devotion of the maiden in his service, the depths of perfidy and treason made manifest in his unnatural brother, the dangers that threatened himself, or those assailing the person of the sovereign in whose cause his loyal zeal was so earnestly engaged.

But from peculiar reasons this last idea speedily worked itself uppermost in the mind of the young cavalier; and he declared, in tones of distraction, that in comparison with the threatened sacrilege, his own apparently assured doom scarcely deserved his attention. It was by his father's fault, by his father's worse than treasonable divulging, the noblest Prince of the earth would perhaps soon be placed in the hands of a rabble of black, designing traitors, who would not scruple, it was possible, even to bathe their accursed hands in his royal blood!

It was then that Dorothy exclaimed with a beautiful blush, 'But if one could be found to venture all for the rescue of his Majesty from so great and heinous a danger, deem you not, dearest Edward, a generous Prince would think he owed to his preserver even so vast a recompense as our happiness in wedded love together, say our harsh fathers what they will?'

'It cannot be doubted, my beloved Dorothy; but do not think I will ever suffer you to hazard your dear safety again for any hope of advantage to myself—no not even for the preservation of my King!' the young man replied. 'It would not matter much were I alone concerned; my

head is already plainly devoted to the axe ! And there is no risk I would not gladly incur if——’ he paused, with a full conviction of the hopelessness of any attempt he could make to escape from the barricaded and well-guarded town.

‘Listen to me, nevertheless, dear Master Holte,’ resumed Dorothy, with fervour. ‘Be in the first place assured that were the danger such as I *could* take upon myself, and save your hazarding, I would never have communicated it to you, but have adventured on it at once. But it is not alone the King’s captivity is threatened ; you also are to be sent to London—to the cruel, babe-murdering Tower—to the block ! who can say ? and without hopeful pause of any sort ! Therefore your safety must be first provided for—must be fearfully hazarded to secure ; and then the King’s redemption will depend upon your loyal diligence and resolve ! Are you willing to hazard much, dearest, for results like these ?’

‘I was thinking but now as you spoke, my Dorothy, of wrenching open the doors of this house, and making my way through all opposers, or perishing in the attempt, along the river behind your house into the open fields !’

‘It would be an impossible enterprise ; the river is staked below the bridge, and guarded by musketeers : you may almost see them pacing at their posts from the windows here,’ Dorothy replied, very sadly ; and her voice faltered as she resumed, ‘but I have thought of a plan for your escape—with the assistance of some good and hearty loyalists, my friends, of the town—which, with God’s blessing, can hardly fail of success.’

‘What is it, my soul’s adored ? There is no risk, however desperate, I will not thankfully put to the venture ; and whatever ill betide of it, bless you with my dying breath for giving me the chance to embrace !’ returned the loyal cavalier.

Dorothy again visibly hesitated.

‘Tis very sad,’ she then exclaimed, evidently much embarrassed, ‘that the treachery and wickedness of others must put us also on indirect means for extrication from the toils. This is of Mistress Mellons’ device ; but I see not what else can be done.’

‘Keep me no longer in suspense, dearest, but declare your mind. There are few means, indeed, which such an end as the preservation of the anointed of the Lord cannot justify. For my own poor life, I put it not in the scale.’

‘Yet, O my Edward ! what are all the kings’ lives of the earth to me compared in value ? But to proceed : I told you, did I not, of the dismissal given by Captain Cromwell to your traitorous brother, and of the passport which permits—nay, ordains him—to leave the town at the least possible delay ?’

‘You did ; and of the well-merited rebuke that accompanied it. True it is, men love the treason, but they hate the traitor !’

‘I suggested to Mistress Mellons that if we could but obtain possession of this passport——’

‘How, dearest Dorothy ?’ interrupted Edward, in tones of great disappointment. ‘What would it avail ? I have light, flowing hair ; my

traitor brother's is dark and soot-curved. We are much of a stature, it is true ; but I am a soldier, and wear the laced garb of one. He is a lawyer, and wears the plain devil's robe of one. His person is now notably known by these signs in the town. Of what use could his passport be to me, if even I had it ?

'So I told Mistress Mellons ; but she had an answer to all my objections. She hath a black wig, she says, left in her house by a player-man, a long time ago, of the King of Bohemia's strolling company, as they called themselves, who had not wherewithal on going to discharge his meat, and so pawned it for the debt ; which, player-like, he hath never yet redeemed. But 'tis ample ; for the poor rogue played Holofernes the tyrant in it, and when the mock head, severed by Judith, was shown the gazers, the hair hung nigh the length of her sword. So, if besides the passport we can secure Grimsorwe's wolf-skin, what for but that, favoured by the darkness and the general engagement of men's minds in other matters, you may evade the town ?'

'There were some likelihood, perchance,' Edward replied, not apparently much cheered by the prospect. 'But you might as well hope to steal a real wolf's skin and tail from the creature's back unperceived, as this robe and passport from Dickon's vigilance.'

'There lies our main difficulty, and the great hazard that has therefore to be run,' replied Dorothy, with an audible tremble in her bell-like accent, and blushing to the deepest crimson of the rose as she added : 'for this is what Mistress Mellons put it to me to do, to win the means for your escape. She knows why I hate Grimsorwe so grievously, for I could not hide my agitation, nor the cause, when I made from meeting him for shelter to her house this morn ; yet will have me advised to let her declare to him that I have confessed my aversion is but a feigned coyness, with a view to win him to some declaration of honourable and honest meaning in his suit. Having learned such particulars at Aston to my betrothed's detriment, that I would do anything to spite him—but find you, for your part, too proud and cold ! I can fairly enough, however, sure, pretend to a bastard gentleman in the way of matrimony ! And so Mistress Mellons would put it on Grimsorwe, ere he leaves the town to-night, to visit me and offer his apologies for whatever so far may have been his misdoing towards me. Yea, this very night, she will let him understand, if he choose to accompany her as mediatrix, I shall expect them, in a friendly disposition, to hear what fair excuses he can offer, in the orchard behind our house !'

'You, Dorothy ! meet that fellow in so solitary a place ? But you mean me, doubtless, to be there and slay him first !' exclaimed Edward, fierce sparkles of jealous and vengeful feeling lighting up in his usually mild and beaming eyes.

'Not for the world ! The man is still your brother, though the most detestable and treacherous of Cains, and you shall not shed one drop of your father's blood in his veins ! Heaven forbid !' Dorothy answered, 'and therefore it is I have provided no horrible temptation of the kind shall be put in your way. You shall in nowise encounter with the wretch, Edward, be you right well assured !'

'And you will keep the rendezvous with him, then ?' the lover re-

turned, with an ireful doubt in his accents that was far from displeasing his hearer. But she put him as speedily as possible out of his alarm.

‘Still less than yourself, dearest. Unless it be for a few instants necessary to carry on the stratagem, and for me to unpack my heart of all the scorn and hatred in it towards the villain. Know that I have sent a message to Tubal Bromycham, which I know well he will respond to, informing him that your life and my honour are in danger, and that only he can rescue both. When he comes I will confide to him so much as concerns the intention to send you for trial to London, and Grimsorwe’s visit; and will implore his aid in the project formed for your deliverance, and in taking a just vengeance on the plotter of all these inhuman intrigues. As my betrothed, Tubal hath a fair right to be offended at a private interview between me and Richard Grimsorwe, and he shall make a sudden appearance to disturb it. The traitor, alarmed, will produce his passport from Captain Cromwell, which Tubal will secure; and then, upon my complaint of all his insolencies, will order him to strip off his disgraced gown, and will fling him, in wrath, into the river behind our orchard. It is at a low ebb this dry weather, and can drown no man; but it will take Grimsorwe time enough to paddle out, and dry himself of the slush, and escape from the smith’s quarters, for you meanwhile to be far out of danger of recapture and the town, in his robe and likeness. How like you this plot, dear Edward? Dame Cooper, who in her youth saw Willie Shakespeare oft, and reads his plays with a truer relish, she doth confess, than her Bible, except Sundays, avers the Merry Wives themselves never devised a better to punish their fat luster in his carnal pursuit.’

Edward could not forbear smiling at the recollection of his favourite poet’s mirthful inventions in the comedy alluded to; but the project seemed still not to please him much, by the objections he continued to raise.

‘But Grimsorwe is no such fat, jovial Satyr of the woods; he is the worse devil of the towns!’ Edward Holte resumed. ‘He will become desperate, finding himself so scorned and outwitted. And ought I to suffer another man, even this new Lord of Birmingham, to run my risk?’

‘The risk is little indeed. Tubal’s strength were a match for any three Grimsorwes! He will be armed; Grimsorwe, as a prisoner, weaponless. Certain of my father’s smiths can be within call if their services are needed. If you refuse, Edward, I shall think you value a small punctilio of your own pride more than your King’s safety—or my life, for that depends on yours!’

‘Dearest creature! what can I have done to merit such goodness—such favour from Heaven! But is it certain that Tubal will so far stand my friend?’

‘There is nothing he will not do to serve the *brother* of *Arabella Holte*. And the rather, I think, that the way of it in some sort returns upon Sir Thomas Holte malignities I have not hitherto mentioned, put upon Tubal at Aston.’

‘For Grimsorwe, let him do his worst; there is nothing the traitor has not deserved of scorn and chastisement! But how is it to be thought

the fellow dares venture near you, even on your gossip's encouragement, after so much aversion as you have shown him ?

'Oh, he is infinitely conceited of himself, and has as low opinion of the fickleness and changefulness of women,' said Dorothy Firebrace. 'And see you not of what consequence it would be to him to win me over from your adherence, Edward ? Truly, he hath importuned Mistress Mellons several times, she tells me, to make what he calls peace between us, and bring him to speech with me. When he met me by chance this morning at the barrier, he had the impudence to fall talking even so, and to profess himself so greatly enamoured of my beauty and *virtue*, forsooth, as to have made up his resolution to woo me as his honourable wife ! and thereby seemed to think he must needs have outbidden my noble Edward ! Anything whatsoever of falsehood he will do, and feign, to deprive you of friending and support, I doubt not. He will come, be assured, and Tubal will do as I desire him. Happen the worst, we can but fail, and throw ourselves directly on Tubal's benevolence !'

'That were to ruin him with his townfolk—a thing not to be thought of,' said Edward, gloomily. 'We must try your dangerous device, Dorothy. But grant I have the disguise and the passport, how can I leave the house under your father's eye ?'

'I have, therefore, named a late hour, at which he is certain to be weary and gone to bed. Or, at the worst, the disguise being brought you to your chamber, when you sally thence my father will conclude it is your brother departing from a brotherly farewell of you.'

'Suppose me, then, free out of Birmingham, what can I do afoot, when every moment will be precious, to hasten with the warning intelligence to Nottingham ?'

'That also is provided for. Mistress Mellons will feign orders from the captain to her ostler to restore your horse to Master Grimsorwe, to return to Aston ; and I have heard you praise it for its unrivalled wind and speed.'

'Ay, were I on fleet Dowsabelle's back, I would fear no overtaking. But the consequences to yourself, Dorothy ! Know you not, abetting my flight may be held equal to an intelligence with the enemy ; and has not martial law been proclaimed in the town ?'

'Who can discover my accomplicing ? And Cromwell and his men will be gone on their vain enterprise, and I will throw myself on Tubal's protection, who will remain master of the town, should any question be raised.'

'I must yield, Dorothy ; but if danger threatens you, swear you will leave Birmingham at once, and throw yourself rather on the protection of one who will then constitute himself at once, at every hazard, your husband, openly, before all the world !' said the young lover, with passionate tenderness. 'But already we are plighted eternally one, and the Church can tie no band which is not already soldered round my heart by love and gratitude !'

It needs not to declare the renewed protestations of fidelity exchanged by the youthful pair, and their effusions of loving sorrow in the prospect of their approaching separation—in all which they were so earnestly engaged that Firebrace re-entered in the dusk almost unobserved ;

Dorothy, in truth, having hardly time to disengage herself from her lover's fondly-clasping arms, and spring to a seat at some little distance, as the master armourer strode moodily in.

CHAPTER XL.

COUNTERMINING.

RAPIDLY and dexterously as the separation between the lovers was effected, it could scarcely have been altogether successfully so. Firebrace's glance expressed anger and suspicion almost equally as it fell on the youthful pair.

In truth, the natural bloom of Dorothy's complexion was singularly heightened, and could scarcely fail to excite observation. But perhaps the armourer was out of temper on other causes : he expressed himself to that effect, at all events.

'So, daughter !' he exclaimed, very sternly, 'where have you been these three good hours, since I found you not at your betrothed's new home, and it seems you took upon you to leave the masterful stranger's protection in which I placed and left you ? Why did you so ? Are all things topsy-turvy now, and do our very female houselings set our will at nought ?'

Confused with these signs of anger and abrupt questioning, and anxious to turn her father's suspicions from Edward Holte, Dorothy answered, on her first impulse, rather imprudently :

'The captain betook himself nearer the assault at Edgbaston than I thought a woman needed adventure, and was so altogether unheedingful of me that the impudent fellow, his pretended prisoner, Richard Grimsorwe, overtook me, and was so insolent and forward in a kind of love-making he has undertaken towards me, and half the girls of Birmingham, that I fled from his affronts to my godmother's refuge at the Black Boy ; and there I found shelter all the time, till the just now of my return home.'

Firebrace's ill-humour increased. 'The man meddles in all things, in truth, and mars a great deal more than he makes,' he said. 'I know not why strangers should take upon them the rule of our town, and even of our houses, and goings in and out of them ! He will tell us next, will Master Cromwell, how to bake our cakes, and at what hour to cover the fire for bed ! Even but now he told me—but no matter what ; we must obey, since he and his soldiers and his rabble have the whole town in their grasp.'

'You will soon find yourselves, I misdoubt me, in the condition of the horse who, to revenge himself on the stag, allowed the man to saddle and bit him, and mount with whip and spur !' Edward could not forbear saying.

The armourer looked at him very pettishly. 'Job lacked not his comforters neither. Master Holte, I thank you !' he said with bitterness. 'But methinks the poor dull beast that allowed himself to be revenged to his own enslavement, was not altogether of our Birmingham mettle. We shall kick and plunge rarely first ! And meanwhile whom

have we chiefly to blame, but you of Aston, for being driven on such ill-advised courses and alliance?’

Dorothy looked significantly at her lover; who suppressed the irritated retort that rose to his lips, and quivered for an instant on them.

‘Nay, mine honoured host, I will bandy no further useless reproach with you. You are weary, doubtless, of your day’s toil and trouble; and I will betake myself at once to my chamber, that you may not be kept from your needful rest to watch my restlessness.’

So saying, Edward took a lamp which was usually set for him, and took a formal good night of the sire and daughter, and retired into the bedchamber he occupied in the Crown House. Not quite so guardedly, however, as he ought, in the farewell glance he exchanged with Dorothy as he closed the door, which as previously mentioned, opened on the armourer’s principal sitting chamber.

‘What strange eyes the Holtes have! How they do gleam, like hot metal! Right glad am I that we are about to be quit of this fine young gentleman, our prisoner. And they say the country-side may hope for a sharp-edged deliverance from the race altogether, at the Parliament’s hands in London,’ Firebrace savagely remarked.

‘I trust not! . . . It were a pity so good and old a name should vanish from our hearing,’ said Dorothy, striving to soften the first vivacious energy of her expression, so contradictory to her angry sire’s.

‘You trust not? How concerns it you, minx?’ rejoined the armourer, still more irascibly. ‘Have we not a much better and older one—the name of our town itself—set up again, to fill the place of a score of haughty Holtes, and such like upstart novelties? And, well reminded, we must take the quicker care that the name of Birmingham fail not again in the land. This marriage between you and Tubal hath been long enough talked about now. He is established in his lordship, and as you grow so fast beyond my mastery, minion, I will place you in a husband’s at the soonest. Why not at once—this very night? There is a good presbyter among these newly-arrived troopers, who will stand upon no ceremonies of church banns and proclamation, but will couple any two willing ones as man and wife for the asking. Tubal will be here anon on this business of arming the Cromwell fellows from our forges; I will speak to him about it, and he will spy as good reasons as I do doubtless in these troublesome times of war and soldiering to assure himself of his promised wife!’

Dorothy heard these words with the less alarm, aware as she was of Tubal Bromycham’s real feelings on the subject. But she thought it best to attempt to pacify her father with some outward signs of submission. ‘Nay, sir,’ she said, ‘leave it to me to bring all to pass more creditably to you than to turn suitor for a husband to your daughter. Tubal needs but a hint from me; a *command* from you would distaste him much, for, as you know, he never well brooked being set under control.’

Firebrace could not dispute the truth of this statement. He was, besides, soothed by the apparently ready compliance of his daughter. But he showed no intention of availing himself of Edward’s retirement to seek rest also, though it was now quite the hour when his usual early

habits consigned him to repose. Dorothy in vain suggested it to him as plainly as she dared, remarking upon his fatigued appearance, and how a white wine posset brought to him in bed would be likeliest to give him refreshment and pleasant sleep after the day's stir and tumult.

Firebrace at last peevishly told her that he must stay up till their *Parliament Master* was served to his mind. And probably observing how her looks fell, added that he would not leave watching of the prisoner that night, lest, hearing of what was in store for him, he should attempt escape. 'To-morrow I shall deliver him to those who will give me a proper discharge, and then I will sleep a whole day to please you, Dorothy !' he said sarcastically : 'that is, unless the captain requires us all to turn out on his heels against Aston !'

It was plain to Dorothy from these words that her father supposed the newly-arrived forces were to be directed at once against the cavaliers at Aston. But she was far from giving him any information to the contrary ; perceiving, moreover, that his suspicions were roused, she no longer attempted to persuade him to remove what she was well aware would be the great obstacle and hindrance of his presence in her project to set Edward Holte at liberty.

She turned the conversation in another direction ; and little pleased would Cromwell have been had he been auditor of the skilful manner in which Mistress Firebrace continued to feed the visible dissatisfaction of the master armourer with the Parliament Captain's latter proceedings.

It was clear that Firebrace was offended and annoyed at the control exercised by this headlong stranger over the government of the town ; and, moreover, that he felt himself and his fellows driven far beyond their original intentions, into some vague and unknown but stormily-working sea of change and revolution.

The conversation, nevertheless, speedily drooped between the pre-occupied father and child, and both were glad at the arrival of Tubal Bromycham, who now made his appearance.

He brought with him the chief part of his young men smiths, who proceeded to open out the forges and prepare all things for the delivery of the armourer and weapons over which they had been so long engaged.

Tubal himself was in a strangely excited mood, and clearly shared the armourer's error that an attack was to be made on Aston.

'I am going with them,' he announced to Firebrace, 'to prevent their carrying the assault in too unneighbourly a fashion. We of Birmingham do not want a silence and a desolation at Aston ; but the uprooting of the cavaliers there, and of yonder haughty, threatening fellow who jeered so at us, and who they say is the King's nephew. That is all well enough. And I trust to show Sir Thomas Holte, and his family, I have as much of the gentleman in me as I pretend to, by my gentle return for their harsh treatment. Master Cromwell shall not hurt a hair of a Holte's head, or overturn a stone of their dwelling-place !'

Firebrace began to say something, to the effect that it was fitter Tubal should attend to his own affairs, regulate his own house, and drop other innuendoes, which Dorothy very reasonably feared would lead to the question of making her a bride out of hand. She therefore prevented her father's progress by asking Tubal to give her his arm for a little airing

in the orchard, feeling sick and faint at heart, as she said, with the day's anxiety and fatigue, and wishful to discourse with him on the future likelihoods of their affairs.

Firebrace understood this demand his own way, and Tubal his.

The former saw the pair go out together with evident satisfaction. The latter, the moment they had passed into the enclosed ground behind the Crown Forge, which was thickly planted with fruit-trees, eagerly inquired what was the meaning of the message he had received from her by Mistress Mellons, of the Black Boy and Woolpack, purporting, it appeared, that Edward Holte's life, and her honour, were in danger from the machinations of Richard Grimsorwe.

Dorothy declared to her betrothed, upon this, all that was necessary to induce him to act the part she desired in the rescue of her lover.

She told him of the plan to remove Edward for trial, and probable destruction, to London, at the instigation of his bastard brother; of the insults offered to her by the latter; of the betrayal he had made of those Tubal had received in his wooing at Aston, and the pleasure he took in the detail; concluding by stating her belief that he hoped to cajole her, in the visit he would be induced to pay her that night, by false promises and love-making to join in the designs against Edward Holte.

At Edward's earnest desire she said nothing respecting the conspiracy to seize upon the person of the King. He feared the prospect would be tempting to all the Birmingham revolutionists. He was mistaken, but it seemed probable enough.

Sympathy for the brother of Arabella Holte—indignation against the unnatural half-brother—would have sufficed to make Tubal perfectly willing to afford the assistance in her projects requested by Dorothy. But Tubal Bromycham's generous manly nature also suggested to him that he owed her every reparation in his power for seeming to trifle with her girlish affections, in offering her a heart so unchangeably fixed another's.

He agreed to all she required of him with the greatest alacrity; and it was arranged that she was to remain in the orchard until Grimsorwe arrived, when the proper moment for his interference was to be signified to him by Mistress Mellons, who was to seek him out in the forge.

It should be stated that the Crown House Orchard bordered the river Rea in a wide triangular space, considerably remote at some parts from the forge buildings, at others close upon them, in the elbow-like bend of its flow towards Deritend Bridge.

There was an approach to the orchard along a narrow path on the edge of the water, from the town; and, if induced to come at all, Grimsorwe was to make for the rendezvous by this access, which was least liable to observation, under Mistress Mellons' seemingly friendly guidance. A summer bower, formed of ivy and honeysuckle, the usual ornaments of an English garden at the time, was the appointed place of meeting; and it was conveniently near the low paling that separated the orchard from the river.

Our singular betrothed pair had scarcely time to complete their arrangement, when word was brought Tubal that Captain Cromwell had arrived with his troopers, and required his attendance. Accordingly he left Dorothy, and returned to the forge.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

FIREBRACE was already there, engaged in delivering the suits of massive armour, roped up in bundles of dozens, to Cromwell, partly by the glare of the numerous rekindled forge fires, but assisted also by a plentiful supply of pitch torches which the captain had brought with him.

Both Tubal and his betrothed's father were surprised to find that the ceremony was not limited to the mere delivery of the armour. The troopers were directed to equip themselves at once in their panoply, in divisions of ten ; and as fast as they were fitted and strapped into their strong casings by the smiths, they were marched back to their quarters at the shambles.

Tubal speedily gathered from these signs that immediate action was purposed—action in which he was fully determined to take his share, though chiefly with a view to evince his still cherished tenderness for Arabella Holte, and consequent wish to preserve her and hers from injury.

He was anxious, however, at the same time, to fulfil his agreement with Dorothy. When the last squad of the now fully accoutred Ironsides had left, he therefore requested Captain Cromwell to give him a little time to muster a picked body of the townsmen to accompany him in the attack on Aston ; but, greatly to his surprise and indignation, that leader demurely informed him that he should not need his services.

'You are to remain on guard of the town, my good lad,' he said, kindly enough, but imperatively enough also, to Tubal Bromycham. And he continued in his favourite Scriptural style, 'You can be of no assistance to me on my present enterprise : but if the Syrians are too strong for me, then ye shall help me ; as I trust I have not been found backward in the behalf of this godly city to-day as against the children of Ammon. But all I require of you at present is to keep the gates, while I go forward on the Lord's business this night. I tell you again, you of Birmingham are to remain as the female eagle in the nest, to guard the eyrie, while I swoop downward on an errand of destruction and salvation ! I shall return—look to see it—with my talons heavy with a mighty spoil. And then shall ye rejoice with me, and all the land in peace and safety, every man once more under his own vine and fig tree. Yea, and throughout all the ages of time, your town shall share with Oliver Cromwell the renown and heaven-inspired salvation of the deed !'

Tubal was not at all satisfied with this cloudy eloquence.

'I shall go with you to Aston, sir,' he said resolutely, 'or before you. The town desires no such plunder and vengeance as you seem to project against the place, which is our chief ornament and palace in these parts. Fight and expel the cavaliers if you will, but it is our purpose here to protect the Holtes in their lives and lawful possessions.'

He clung so obstinately to this statement and resolve, that Cromwell became greatly embarrassed and annoyed.

'What ! the old leaven stirs again within you,' he said pointedly to

Tubal, Firebrace being present. 'And for the sake of Holte's *fair, despising daughter* ye mind not what ye put to the hazard? Nay,' he continued, perhaps a little shocked at his own imprudence, observing Firebrace's surprised look, 'come with me both; and on your sacred pledge to secrecy I will reveal what I truly have in hand.'

The two armourers accordingly, struck with the solemnity of the captain's manner, removed to some distance from the tired smiths and the forges at the back of the Crown premises, to a spot where Captain Cromwell, finding he could not otherwise secure the necessary aid and acquiescence, revealed to the two astonished Birmingham leaders his real intentions and plans.

It is little indeed to say that they were astonished; they were horrified and amazed to the last degree!

The impetuous genius of Cromwell, his audacity in action, and his purposes, had alike, at this period, far out-leaped the national movement and impulses.

At no period, indeed, of the whole tremendous struggle and tragedy did the feelings of the great mass of the nation—least of all of the middle and opulent classes, or of those that aspired to elevation on the established ideas of what *was* elevated—run to the overthrow of the royal dignity and power.

Firebrace, certainly a man of wealth and position as head of an influential trade, felt insulted at the total absence of recognition of the importance of these qualities under a feudal monarchy. But he desired their acceptance, not the overthrow of the power which it was believed could alone confer due honour and recognition to the claims of the new influences.

Tubal Bromycham, on his part, though a man born among the people—who had lived its hardest life—undergone its heaviest toils—had suffered its worst deprivations and insults—still knowing himself of the most anciently aristocratic blood of the land, thirsted only to resume the rights and distinctions of his high-born race. What wanted these men with effecting a seizure and delivery of the King of England, like some arrested malefactor, into the hands of the furious mobs and irreverend demagogues of London?

Tubal expressed himself at once with appropriate vehemence on the subject.

'Cross of God! lay hands on the most sacred person of the King himself! which to preserve, my ancestor, William de Birmingham, suffered himself rather to be hacked to pieces at the Battle of Cressy, whereof the picture-book at the Moat House plainly tells! What treasonable sacrilege is this you talk, Master Cromwell?'

Besides sharing to the fullest this strong revulsion of loyal feeling, Armourer Firebrace was alarmed and irritated almost equally at the notion of the town being left with such dangerous assailants so nigh at hand.

'Mean you to say, Captain Cromwell,' he exclaimed, 'that you will go on this distant, treasonable, sacrilegious, most rash enterprise, and leave the cavaliers at Aston to harry us? Are you a madman, or are we all madmen that have trusted you?'

‘I have shown you how you may keep your town against any imagination of danger in that direction ; at least until I return with so mighty a hostage in my hands that it shall be as a ransom not only for you, but for the entire people of England ! What would you more ? The success of the enterprise depends altogether on its speed ! Should the lightning, launched against some towering oak, play around the leaves and branches, or strike the sturdy trunk at once ? All topples down with that—leaves, branches, acorns—all !’

‘Rather I do suspect it is a cowardly desertion of us ! And that having hurtled us on into a desperate jeopardy by your acts and exhortations, you are frightened away, with your spick and span new armourmen, by the mere sight of an equal enemy !’ Firebrace furiously rejoined.

‘You are an old man, Father Armourer,’ Cromwell replied, sedately, but not without a momentary darkening of wrath ; ‘and fie on you, that snow-white hairs should cover so hot a brain ! But the mere sight of the same cools me.’

‘Then I trust *I* shall not be held too *young* for something braver than threats to an old man, captain !’ said Tubal, also greatly exasperated. ‘And I tell you, of my own part, that what you propose enters in no way into our notions here, and that we will not in anywise aid or abet you in the execution, but rather do what we can to thwart and prevent !’

‘That can be little,’ Cromwell replied. ‘My troopers are armed—every man ready with a foot in the stirrup. I shall but ask a blessing on my enterprise with my valiant fellows to start upon it. As for you of Birmingham, how can ye help yourselves ? Unless you would basely yield yourselves and all yours to the mercies of yonder haughty young German savage and his riders at Aston, ye must maintain the town manfully till my return with the King my prisoner ; whereupon you may look to have the whole Parliament army engaged in your defence.’

‘You shall never return into Birmingham with the King’s sacred person disgraced and traitorously captured !’ returned Tubal, fiercely. ‘I am Lord of Birmingham, and I tell you the true Lords of Birmingham have been and ever will be loyal to their Prince !’

‘Lord of Birmingham, are you, and speak thus to him who hath made you so ? By the Lord, then, you shall find that vipers’ eggs hatch by the score to the brood !’ Cromwell exclaimed, evidently now violently exasperated with the resistance to his will. ‘Look to it, I say, my fine Blacksmith Lord ! I will make half a dozen *lords* in Birmingham, ere I depart, who will keep me a hole to creep in again when I return, be sure. “Sacred person of the King,” quotha ! Blacksmiths, stick to your anvils. Ye shall have all the swords, bucklers, pistols, breast-plates, back-plates, stirrup irons, and leathers—what not !—to make and fashion for the mighty men of war ; but for the principles, and purposes and means by which this war is to be fought out, leave them to men of study and understanding in such matters. What, man !’ he concluded, turning suddenly upon Firebrace ; ‘you know not the meaning of your own sign ! What should the crown and mason’s level side by side portend, but that all men shall become equal again, and a great and glorious

Republic, like that of the Seven United Provinces, make us all—and no one!—kings and masters in England!’

So saying, with a sternly imposing gesture, the Parliament leader turned away, and left the two chiefs of Birmingham rooted where they stood with surprise.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE ESCAPE.

A LONG pause and silence of astonishment ensued with the twain. But Tubal was even yet more amazed at the style in which Firebrace broke it.

‘Worse times than ever at hand for all men, it is plain,’ he muttered; ‘and no man knows what may befall an hour before or after. Tubal, I would have my child placed in stronger protection than an infirm and wearied old man’s; I would be free in mind, I mean, to encounter the adversities in store. Let us have this long-talked-of wedding at once—at once! not an hour’s delay! Take your bride home with you to the Moat House this very night!’

Tubal was greatly taken aback; and no evasion occurring to him at the moment, he unintentionally increased the armourer’s exasperation and suspicion to a high degree by his reply.

‘Nay, sir,’ he said; ‘I will offer no restraint to Mistress Firebrace’s free choice and will hitherto. And I must needs confess it has seemed to me of late to run strongly in another direction!’

‘And speak you so calmly and indifferently of the same?’ returned the armourer, violently roused and indignant, as much at the tone of the remark, as the remark itself, of his intended son-in-law. ‘Ho! and what was that I heard Cromwell say regarding your zeal for Sir Thomas Holte’s proud cate of a daughter?’

Tubal changed to a deadly pallor in his robust hues. Fortunately it was just then that Mistress Mellons made her appearance from the orchard, and advanced towards them, and Tubal took advantage of the circumstance to break off the conversation.

‘I will abide in all things Mistress Dorothy’s own wishes, father,’ he said, hurriedly. ‘I left her in the orchard—I will seek her there again. But here comes a stranger, a very gossiping woman, of the market-place. Pray you go in, and I will send your daughter to you; and what she decides shall be done without further wrangling.’

He retired abruptly as he spoke, and appeared to pass Mistress Mellons with the briefest interchange of courtesy between townfolk and acquaintances. But the landlady of the Black Boy found time to whisper to him: ‘Make haste; he is there—the villain is; but I would not the precious child were at the hazard of a five moments’ alone with him! Quick! send me the other trappings to the great Bellows Forge. I have the tyrant’s wig under my coats in readiness.’

Firebrace, out of temper with everything and everybody, and taciturn by disposition, was withdrawing himself from Mistress Mellons’ line of

advances, dreading her gossiping propensities. But on reflection he wondered what the landlady of the Black Boy could want at his forge, and stopped to ask the question.

The good woman, however, had her answer ready: 'My lodger, the captain, has dropped his purse, as he supposes, somewhere in the smithies, and has sent me to look for it, good Master Armourer. And it needs no cat's eyes for the task, with the fires so brightly alit that I did hear some should say they thought the Crown Forge itself was in a blaze. Most likely, in the great Bellows Forge, he told me. But how fares it with your fair daughter since her morning's fright, good sir?'

'Do not ask me; you women know each other's secrets best,' returned Firebrace; and, afraid of further palavering, he left the scene, and re-entered his house.

As he slowly remounted to the general sitting-chamber, where he was determined to renew his vigilance on the prisoner, something like a distant, stifled yell came to the master armourer's hearing. It even seemed to come from the direction of his orchard! and he listened for a moment with a deadly terror and anxiety at his heart. Could Tubal Bromycham's outward composure have concealed a secret exasperation against his betrothed? And was it within the range of possibility that anger had transported him to offer some violence to Dorothy, on learning that her sentiments were changed towards him?

No; it was impossible—and yet!—

Struck with the deepest alarm, the armourer was about to retrace his steps, when he perceived his daughter herself passing rapidly out of the orchard gate into the inclosures of the forges below.

She had a kind of bundle, he thought, under her arm; but as all seemed well enough with her, and she made towards the shed where Mistress Mellons was ensconced, Firebrace considered there could be no occasion for his interference, and resumed his original purpose.

The armourer seated himself with a gloomy and disconsolate feeling, nevertheless, in his ample fire-place, keeping his eyes towards the door of his cavalier prisoner's sleeping-room.

An ever-haunting though vague suspicion that all was not as he would have it between his daughter and this young man, continued to disturb the armourer.

Not alone Tubal's observation, much that he had himself observed, contributed to annoy him.

He felt no appetite, and declined old Mahala's well-meaning exhortations to take some food into his stomach, 'to lift up his poor heart,' as she said. 'Lackaday, and what ail'd at his worship to stare as wild as a baked herring in a dish? The young gentleman was fast asleep—had been as quiet as a mouse, these hours, in his chamber.'

Even with the zealous assistance afforded her, Dorothy Firebrace would thus have found some difficulty in carrying out her plans for her lover's escape, had not the old man's real exhaustion stood her friend also. The armourer had not seated himself very long in his chair ere he began to yield to the drowsy warmth and comfort of his hearth, after his day's fatigue; and, finally, he sunk into a slumber.

An uneasy and easily-disturbed one, however, since even so slight a tap as Dorothy Firebrace made at her lover's door, after crossing the chamber on breathless tip-toe, startled him. He resumed his senses, moreover, with a quickness that showed how slightly he had relinquished them ; and having the presence of mind also to dissemble at once that he did so.

He saw the door open slightly ajar, and a hand put out, which pressed his daughter's, and then took from hers a closely-folded bundle, apparently of some dark stuff.

The door then closed again, and Dorothy, softly approaching her father, drew a chair, and seated herself directly between him and the line of view across the chamber.

It should be mentioned that the apartment was only lighted by the fire-glow, which, as it was still warm August weather, was only kept up for culinary purposes, and was at this time very low on the hearth. Consequently Dorothy had good hopes she was not observed ; until, seating herself, her eye encountered the suspicion and anger gleaming in her sire's now opened orbs.

'What did you at the young man's chamber door?' the armourer inquired, fiercely. 'Are these maidenly manners, daughter Dorothy? or have you laid yourself out purposely to confirm your betrothed's suspicions? He hinted such to me but now ; and if you have not consented at once to become his wife——'

'Dear father,' interrupted Dorothy, suppressing her agitation by a strong effort of self-control, and driven most unwillingly on the equivocation, 'I have—as soon as ever he is willing to become my husband. I promise you so, on my fair faith ! But I know not how it should impeach my maidenly bearing to forward Master Holte a provision of clean linen Mistress Mellons hath brought him from his brother at the Black Boy, and other necessities, for his journey to London ; Master Grimsorwe himself having leave to return to Aston, and no further need of them.'

'Ay, so ! I knew not they were so brotherly together ; but I am glad of what you say concerning Tubal and your courtship, child. Methinks now I could eat a morsel,' said Firebrace, greatly soothed by those seeming good tidings, which were only true in sound. But how could it be helped ?

This opening for delay was not in Dorothy's notions at all. She was in hopes that her wearied sire would now at last have consented to go to repose, and leave the coast clear for Edward's retreat.

Still there was no remedy but patience and watching opportunities.

She therefore assisted Mahala to produce the contents of the pantry before the master armourer, protracting as long as she possibly could the lighting of the lamp necessary to guide him (however proverbially easy the operation), in the movements between plate and mouth. Firebrace had demanded light twice, and the second time with asperity and evidently reawakening suspicions, before the young girl unwillingly complied.

Still she had some reason to hope, in the disguise arranged, if only the presence in the house and departure of the supposititious Grimsorwe himself could be accounted for,

But difficulties seemed to multiply. One of the maid-servants, who had been staring down in the smithies—and perhaps enjoying some slight interval of courtship with one of the young fellows there—came in to announce that ‘a fine London gentleman wanted to speak with the master;’ and on her footsteps followed Major Monk.

The major apologised for troubling the master armourer at his meal, with his accustomed bland politeness; and then producing a written paper, informed Firebrace that it was an order from Captain Cromwell for the delivery of the prisoner, Edward Holte, Esq., into his custody, and that of a couple of armed townsmen, assigned to his assistance, to convey the culprit to London.

‘I was in no such hurry myself, and am concerned to be thrust upon the business at such uncivil hours; but Master Cromwell is a strangely peremptory and changeable personage,’ said the major, who certainly looked a little puzzled. ‘At first he did demur, methought, to any obedience at all to his Excellency the Lord General’s summons to a certain rendezvous. I was appointed to assign him and his troopers, south. And now, nothing will serve him, but he will to horse and ride away at midnight on the fulfilment! And so hath sent for me, and rid himself by this writing of all further care and responsibility at once regarding the prisoner.’

‘You shall be very welcome indeed to the custody, howbeit, Major Monk, since that is your name; for my eyes and heart are alike wearied out with the needful vigilance,’ said Firebrace, eagerly, and preparing to rise at the very moment and summon the prisoner forth to his fate.

Dorothy’s wonderful courage and presence of mind did not, however, desert her in the emergency.

‘Give the *unhappy gentleman and his brother* a little further time for their brotherly lamentations and adieux,’ she said, forcibly arresting the attention of both her hearers on the words, and also speaking them as loudly as she could, in hopes to reach Edward’s hearing. ‘I forgot to tell you, father,’ she added, turning to Firebrace, with an unquavering resolve in her accents, only the mighty passion that animated her could have given, ‘that a gentleman with black hair and in a lawyer’s robe—you must oft have seen now in the town, and I to my sorrow this morning—but provided with a sufficient passport, is in Master Holte’s chamber, taking his farewells there; whom, rather than hold much speech with, I admitted, without troubling to wake you for consent, so wearied as you were.’

There were formidable discrepancies in this statement, if Firebrace, had had time allowed him to consider them. But he was besides thrown into a great passion by what he heard.

‘Pass a scoundrel through my chambers, before my closed eyes, to my prisoner, whom you yourself accused of great insolences not an hour ago!’ he exclaimed. ‘I am an old man, as I was told erewhile, but to chastise such an intruder will give me my youthful sinews yet again.’

‘Father! under your own roof—a man protected by Captain Cromwell’s pass—on lawful, and even commendable business here now!’ interposed Dorothy, while her parent tugged with but indifferent suc-

cess to bring the handle of his sword round to his hand. 'Major Monk, I pray you interfere to keep the peace, while I warn the worthless object of my father's wrath to depart at once.'

Major Monk seemed willing to oblige in this respect, and addressed some soothing observation to the irritated elder, while Dorothy stepped across the chamber to the prisoner's door.

The armourer himself, on reflection, was perhaps not unwilling to be restrained; not to mention that his weapon had become so entangled in his cloak that he was ashamed at the efforts necessary to extricate it. Dorothy had therefore the necessary time to execute her own share in the manœuvre.

The door was now ajar, and she thrust it partly open, exclaiming, with a well-assumed contemptuous and angry accent, 'Come forth, Master Grimsorwe; now, as ever, you breed hate and contention wherever you go; and you must put an end to your leavetaking, since here is an honourable messenger of our masters in London, sent on a hangman's office to convey the unhappy gentleman, your brother, thither at once.'

'Coming, sweet Mistress Firebrace; coming on the word!' replied a voice which did not badly counterfeit the oiled insidiousness of Grimsorwe's tones. 'Good brother, so, farewell! I am sorry for you, but what must be, will be.'

'Make haste in your own preparations, Master Holte; but Major Monk will doubtless give you some half-hour's space for them. For you, Master Grimsorwe, get at once to your horse, which you will find well bestowed at our courtyard gate, and get you with what speed you may from the town. You leave an ill name behind you, go when and where you will!'

'I am grieved to hear you say so, fair maid,' said the person who now stepped boldly forward into the little chamber, and who, in his lawyer's robes, with his long black hair, broad-brimmed slouched hat, and ink-discoloured complexion, looked sufficiently like Richard Grimsorwe to deceive any ordinary and casual observation.

Unhappily, however, Edward Holte, stimulated by a natural longing to take a lover's farewell of his beloved, and ignorant of the extremely offensive light in which the armourer was likely to take any species of liberty from a person of whose insults his daughter had already complained, thought it sufficiently in the character he had assumed to add, 'But I cannot leave you until I am assured my peace is made at least with one fair townswoman of Birmingham, for whose sake I can despise the anger of its men!' And he had the extreme indiscretion to fold her suddenly in his arms, and press a kiss on her, sooth to say, now most unwilling lips.

In fact, Dorothy uttered a kind of shriek of deprecation, but taken in a much stronger sense by her already irritated sire. Firebrace in a manner tore his sword from its tangles, and flung himself in headlong fury and rage in the way of the escaping prisoner, with it naked and raised gleaming in his hand.

'Defend your insolent life, bastard!' he yelled. 'I am by descent a noble of France, and you are but a half-blooded knave-born of Eng-

land, and I will teach you to dare to insult the blood of Audomar Fier-à-bras in his last descendant's child.'

Dorothy now indeed gave a cry of terror and grief, and threw herself between the enraged old man and her imprudent lover. Major Monk also advanced, but seemed to hesitate what to do.

Edward did his best to retrieve the false step he had taken.

'I crave your pardon, Master Firebrace—very humbly I crave your pardon—and the fair maiden's. I must needs have made too free with my landlady of the Black Boy's heady ale to-day! Do not threaten me, sir, for I cannot stand upon my defence; I am still but a prisoner on enlargement. Here is my passport, Major Monk; I pray you stand by me and it, to see me safely out of the house.'

In his agitation he resumed, however, but too plainly his natural tones. Major Monk himself was struck by the change; the armourer so confused and amazed, that he involuntarily dropped the point of his angry weapon to the floor.

This gave the former an opportunity to interpose. He took the passport, examined its brief contents, and returned it to Edward Holte. 'It is in due form,' he said, 'and recommends you to a free passage and assistance from all soldiers and others adhering to the Parliament. Proceed, sir; Master Armourer will make no further obstacle.'

But a series of ideas were striking like the rapid tinkle of a repeater in the armourer's brain. 'Stop,' he suddenly exclaimed, 'stop, Major Monk! The passport concerns not this man! Whoever saw light amber hair growing under black? See yonder flowing love-lock! It is my—your prisoner, Edward Holte, escaping in disguise!'

'Indeed, but it seems strangely like!' said Major Monk, himself greatly struck with the phenomenon displayed. 'I'm sorry, sir, but you must await investigation.'

'That shall I not! Give me way! I am armed! I am desperate!' said Edward, and he now in reality produced a pair of pistols which Grimsorwe always carried in a secret pocket of his robe. 'Stand out of the way, Master Armourer,' he continued. 'Your grandsire's sword can do nothing against these loaded weapons. I mean you no harm. You are the father of Dorothy Firebrace. But I will be no longer stayed by any hindrance!'

'Your pardon again, sir,' said Major Monk; 'I have a competent guard at the door. It is not my way to thrust myself unprovided on enterprises. Come in, men, and level your carbines!'

The door of the chamber was, indeed, at once thrown open, and two tall young fellows, well armed, but whose garb rather resembled the livery of serving-men than that of towns-people, entered. And they were furnished with muskets, and Edward now, in truth, seemed confronted by overwhelming odds.

Dorothy herself, wild with dismay and grief, implored him to surrender. But on a sudden the young cavalier uttered a joyful exclamation:

'What, my servants, Humphrey and Hodge, restored to me armed thus! Let no man stir from this chamber, good fellows, while your master's son escapes for his life! Farewell, dearest Dorothy!—fear

nothing. My rescue must have been purposed by Master Cromwell himself, since he has chosen me such jailers !'

And with a sudden movement, passing the armourer and Monk—who found two muskets levelled at once at his breast—Edward rushed to the door of the chamber, and passed out.

Firebrace alone would have ventured pursuit, but as he turned with that purpose, Dorothy threw herself frantically into his arms, and exclaiming, 'Spare him, spare him ; he is my plighted husband !' so embarrassed her father by her clinging that he could not stir without violence to her. And to crown the success of the manœuvre, old Mahala most kindly took the opportunity to overturn the lamp, hobble to the door, lock it, and hide the key in her vasty pockets.

Not but that she then set to work to make a feeble noise for assistance. But luckily the forges were now quite abandoned by the smiths, who had returned with their captain to his head-quarters at the Moat House ; and as the windows of the chamber only opened on those premises, the armourer perceived it would be useless to summon aid in that direction. Major Monk, on his part, yielded quietly enough to the necessity of the situation, finding himself a prisoner, instead of a prisoner-maker, close under the muzzles of two hostile carbines.

'Master Firebrace, it is in vain,' he said, taking a seat ; 'let us yield to the superior force put upon us ; but your unhappy daughter and these men may have dearly to abide what they have done. Let us patiently await what rescue may be appointed us ; and, anyhow, I shall remain in the town until I know the Parliament's pleasure in the matter !'

Major Monk was not sorry, perhaps, for a pretence to remain in Birmingham, in the neighbourhood of luckless Blacksmith Clarges' hand some young virago of a wife. But he himself possibly imagined at the moment that the duty he owed his new masters in this singular affair alone influenced him.

CHAPTER XLIII.

GREAT POLICY ON A SMALL SCALE.

CROMWELL, leaving Deritend in high dudgeon with what might be called the two loyal leaders of the revolution in Birmingham, returned to the Black Boy. On the way he resolved upon a course of action which illustrated on a small scale his skilful balancing of men and parties in the tremendous national anarchy that followed the destruction of royalty in England.

He sent word to the escaped fanatic preacher, Wrath-of-God Whitehall, and to Sisyphus the bellows-blower, to join him in a thanksgiving he was desirous to offer at his quarters for the safety of the town, and to provide against further danger. Meanwhile, active arrangements were made for the secret midnight start he had in contemplation.

Sisyphus arrived the first from his outpost at the Parsonage, which he had occupied all the day with soldierly implicitness to orders, though at the head of a band of zealots of the very lowest and most headstrong

populace of the town. It was upon this former circumstance that Cromwell, who received him in his private chamber, complimented him dexterously, in the first instance.

'Indeed,' he said, kindly embracing the maimed and desperate-looking figure before him, 'you and your men are not held of any such honourable estimation in the town, it seems; but to me you appeared models for us all! Fie! how steadily did ye keep the house yonder, as ye were bid, while the young man, Tubal, plunged like an unbroken steed in harness, and would, if he had had his way, have ruined all by bursting out on the cavaliers, which would but have let them in as easy as riding a herd of oxen with the goad! But you remembered, no doubt, that scripture, "*He makes His people willing in the day of His power.*"'

'I have been trained to the wars, captain; where for so much as stepping out of the ranks unbid a man should run the gauntlet of all his fellows, or come out, as red as a lobster in his own blood, from the provost-marshal's handling,' replied the Anabaptist, with a gloomy glare forward into vacancy, but as if his mind forcibly repictured to him some such scene of military infliction.

'I'll warrant he has had a taste of discipline himself of the kind,' thought Cromwell; but he continued aloud, 'Aye, aye, but we are more citizens here than soldiers. But then again, I must say that if there be too little discretion in some of our valour, there is too little valour in some of our discretion. The elders of the town showed themselves but faint-heartedly in the dispute—Armourer Firebrace in especial. It almost seems to me as if it would be an over-trust in the worthiness of the cause to leave the disposal of things altogether in the town—should any accident call me away awhile—in either his or this pretended new Lord of Birmingham's hands.'

He looked enquiringly at Sisypheus, who distinctly ground his yellow wolf-like teeth, and repeated the expression in a tone of scornful mockery, 'Lord of Birmingham, forsooth!'

'Truly, I had forgotten,' Cromwell rejoined, with a smile, 'but you and yours do hold there should be an end of all kingship and lordship and knightship, and the like setting-up one above another of us poor earthly worms: is it not so?'

'It was for holding and declaring that doctrine, in the camps of the father of the German Wild-Rider who has come against us, that I suffered—I mean, it was Bohemia himself who ordered me to be stripped naked, and lashed from end to end of the camp near Prague, for so exhorting the soldiers, after he had deserted us amidst the bitter ice and snow, and betaken himself to comfortable quarters with his wife, Elizabeth of England—who, however, mostly played the man better than he—while we were left to freeze and starve!' the Anabaptist returned, with a vindictive kindling in his usually ferociously still expression.

'Well, and it was enough to make you angry with such unthankful dignities, poor man!' Cromwell replied, very feelingly; even tears started in his eyes. 'And yet it seemed you fought afterwards for that same unworthy prince and leader, even to the loss of some precious pieces of your outward framework of mortality. Was it not so?'

'I was a soldier, hired for that,' replied the Anabaptist, raising his hook hand, and contemplating it with a look, for a moment, of intense sadness. 'But for this mishap I should have been a something more than a bellows-blower in the world! I did always purpose it; but who can resist his fate?'

'How! you believe also in the inevitableness of things as they happen?—in a fixed and preordained destiny of man?' said Cromwell, now regarding the fanatic with a degree of interest in the question which seemed to express some fellow-feeling of his own on the subject.

'Could I change mine, it should be seen!' was the doubtful reply, but delivered with a passion and vehemence that startled the examiner.

'You are not content, then, with the condition in which it has pleased Providence to place you?' he said.

'CONTENT!' returned the Anabaptist, in the roar rather of a wild beast than of a man's accents on the word. 'How should I be CONTENT—to be styed in a filthy hole and corner of a dismal town—baked and choked in the summer heats—frozen in the winter chills—with an ugly hag for a wife, who has scarce preserved some fiendish mocking resemblance to the outward form of her beautiful sex—condemned to constant, endless, hopeless toil for the means to keep this mutilated carcase and pining soul together—with no portion in the savoury meats and drinks, the fine raiment, the sports, the revels, the triumphs of the hard task-masters, whose wealth I, and such as I, create? You ask me if I am lower than *beast*, captain, when you ask me if I am *content*!'

'I meant no such rudeness, dear man; churn not your teeth at me,' replied Cromwell, rather unpleasantly struck with this fierce rejoinder. 'Alack, alack, the King and his advisers have much to answer for, in removing the old dams and landmarks, and setting the waters loose! Yet, who knows what God may purpose, even in our own days, in the resharing of Esau's defrauded birthright? Even now, as I take it, you are a man willing to earn better wages and accommodation than any you now receive; and I tell you, in the Parliament's name, that so long as you keep and hold the Parsonage with your fellows—which is a special inlet of the town—I give to you and them exemption from every other authority but my own, and pay equal to any by the footmen in the Earl of Essex's army received. Do you promise me to maintain the post, on these conditions, against any, in or out of the town, who may offer to take it from you, until my return?'

'Ay, will he! against all the devils of hell blasting fire from their nostrils!' returned the Anabaptist; and Cromwell himself scarcely liked the tone in which he resumed, with a dark leer of intelligence in his savage eyes: 'Give me but the time and opportunity, and I will make myself master and ruler of the whole town, so that you shall have no need to fear weak-hearted counsels henceforth! Think you I love my master Firebrace, who spurns my livelihood to me worse than to a houseless cur?—father though he be of the fairest woman-girl in Birmingham—what say I?—in the world!'

'Go, go; I purpose no such topsy-turvy mastery!' returned Cromwell, with considerable disgust and anger in his tones. 'And what ado has such a scum of manhood as thou art to remark that the maiden is sq

fair? Hast thou not a proper hag-wife, by thine own showing, of thy own? I do but ask and authorise you to keep me this inlet of the town in readiness for my return, which will be in a few hours; and never dream, then, that I and my soldiers will suffer any other mastery where we are than our own!

'You do only purpose an attack on Aston, then, captain,' the Anabaptist resumed, after a slight but seemingly ill-pleased pause, 'and would have your retreat assured?'

'Why do you ask, now? This meddling and poking in higher concerns than your bidding will never do!' said Cromwell, very severely, and inwardly sorry, no doubt, that the necessity of his affairs compelled him to take up with such an alliance.

'Because—and I was coming to you with the news—a servant of the house there, who is under a spell to do obedience to a witch who favours the town for some cause, came whispering to me in the dark, that there are but some three-score wearied men and spent horses with the Palatine Prince there; who may be easily fallen upon and put to the edge of the sword with such a force as is now unknown to them, at your command. And so Master Grimsorwe himself bade me tell you.'

'Master Grimsorwe!' replied Cromwell, rather surprised; 'I thought he meant not to depart till morning, and was in lodging overhead. Are you assured the advice comes from him?'

'It was dark night when I encountered him at the Bull Ring; but I could not be mistaken in the man's black hair and skin, and lawyer's robe, and tongue-tied, careful lawyer's speech!'

'Was he returning on foot and alone, so late at night, to his father's house, with his hateful eyes unsatisfied of his brother's ruin?' said Cromwell.

'Not on foot, sir; on as cleanly-limbed charger as ever I espied; and I have seen, to my sorrow, the finest of the wild Tartar breed,' replied the Anabaptist.

'Indeed! why, where could he have hired it? I had laid strict orders that nothing four-footed, most of all, should leave the town!' said Cromwell, the energetic lines of his brows knotting into deep furrows. 'However, we will make no question now on these matters. I can, methinks, discern a reason why the traitor has changed his mind to return so suddenly—that he may feign his own danger in remaining, and pretend ignorance of our *assault designed*! Go now, good brother; you shall have your commission in writing. Here it is.'

The captain affected to let fall by accident, in these latter words, what he thought would mystify the Anabaptist on his present military intentions.

In reality he seemed so. 'I must go on first to the Black Chapel in the fields, that I may put my people aware of what is now toward. But faithful Moggs meanwhile keeps my post,' he remarked, 'and you may depend on having your orders well observed, though I cannot read what you have written me here.'

Sisyphus retired, and Cromwell was left alone for some minutes.

He mused profoundly during the interval.

'But no, no!' he said at the conclusion aloud, though but to himself.

'Turn not aside either to the right or to the left ! Terrible judgments have ever befallen those who did not the Lord's will, even as He had willed it, and no otherwise. "*A lion met him by the way and rent him !*" No, no ; or else it were a showy act to begin the doings of my troop with an overthrow of the King's nephew, attended, as he is, with but a third of our numbers, those wearied and disheartened, and never dreaming of so nigh a mischief !'

Shunning this temptation resolutely, and not as the luckless prophet of old failed to shun his, Cromwell continued in thought until the fugitive apostle from Nottingham was announced.

This poor man entered with a wildly excited and eager countenance. It may be imagined that the tumult and confusion of the events that had occurred in the town since his arrival had not contributed to steady his disordered intellect.

'In good time,' said Cromwell, also embracing the maniac prophet as he had the fanatic leveller. 'But how comes it you are not properly cleansed and brightened of your apparel, worthy master ? Is it no written, "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment ?"'

'So it is written ; but the godly poor man with whom I now sojourn his clothes are rather of all the colours of the rainbow, being a dyer of his trade ; and though he would have lent me of his raiment, is not that the Bow of the Promise ? And who says that the time of the fulfilment is at hand ?' replied Wrath-of-God.

'Thyself hast said it, and did speak the same most clearly, with thy mouth full—cram full—of a good gospel, when thou didst here arrive, replied Cromwell. "'Behold I come quickly," didst thou proclaim, a with the voice of one crying, not in the desert, but on the mountain top to all Israel and Judah. "Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take from thee thy crown," I add. Dost apprehend me clearly brother ?'

'What—no ! Thou speakest as if thou hadst heard the trumpet sound ; but it cannot be that all the nations of the earth are about to utter the AMEN at last, as with one voice ?' exclaimed the prophet, eye and mouth alike gaping with expectation.

'Not quite so ; but the way is to be prepared,' Cromwell answered 'To speak as one of this world for awhile,' he went on to say, with steadiness and coolness that seemed singularly to sober the imagination of his hearer, 'The minister of this town—a confirmed popisher in his practices, of the true Laudean breed—is to be turned out, as a wolf shepherd. I have appointed, in the Parliament's name, that a new one shall be chosen ; yea, and as the custom ever was till the late arch bishop's usurpation, by common suffrage of the people. Will you, who have come as an angel or messenger among them, undertake the charge, and also the establishment in this place of a small heaven, as it were of the saints—the reign of Christ upon a little bit of the earth—suffering none other rule in Birmingham, but 'establishing the Bible law in full power and dominion, and the way of holiness and righteousness in all things therein ? I know that the major part of the people will no sooner hear you declare such sweet things of peace and holiness

and all good rest, as you can—poor, blessed-hearted, overworked souls !—than they will follow you, and abide by you ; and your strength of charity and goodwill among men shall prevail, on the one hand, to keep down bloodthirsty and ill-designing creatures who are already a-brewing mischief among us ; and on the other, shall hinder any return of carnal-minded rich men and others to the fleshpots of Egypt.’

Whitehall gazed with piercing earnestness at Cromwell as he spoke.

‘Nay, he knows not—he knows not who and what I am ; else would he stand and gaze thus unblenchingly, and would not rather fall down and worship ?’ the hapless lunatic murmured to himself. ‘Nay, know I who or what myself I am ? There is a dark cloud in my brain ; is it the sun or the lightning that shall break therefrom ? Meanwhile, speaks he not as one having an assurance ? I will do even as thou sayest, man of war ! And if the people do choose me for their pastor, is not the voice of the people the voice of God ? And truly I will reign over them even as Samuel reigned in Israel, by peace and godliness alone.’

Accordingly Whitehall assented on his part to this division of impulse and power which Cromwell aimed at producing in the town ; and further agreed to remain awhile to join in the prayers for a blessing on a certain enterprise of the captain’s, which he now declared his intention of starting upon forthwith.

CHAPTER XLIV.

CUT-THROAT MEG.

MEANWHILE the dark-plotting bellows-blower, proceeding in the direction of Bordesley, seemed on a sudden to alter his mind.

‘I will go and warn her that she come not near me, as she says she will, where I am ! What need I with the hateful hag glaring at me there, now that so much happier times are at hand for me, and all the joys of life, so long withheld, but promised to the inheritors of the kingdom on earth ?’

The Anabaptist turned, as he thus bethought himself, into a very narrow lane, reeking with every species of filth and abomination that could offend all the senses alike, and which seemed, by a dull watery gleam at the end, to open upon the River Rea.

It was a haunt of haggard profligacy and misery, familiar as it seemed to his steps. His home was in a house on the water at the lane end, or rather a deplorable wooden hovel, that admitted almost every species of bad weather at its paneless windows and gaping planks and rafters. It was built close on the edge of the water, and might possibly at some period have been decently tenanted, and used as a warehouse for goods capable of transportation on a stream generally shallow, though subject to violent floods. On one side was a kind of open gallery, raised on piles that projected a little into the waterway, with the remains of steps to descend to it. But, like the rest of the building, these were fallen into ruin and decay. In fact, from the river it looked as if the whole hovel—walls, chimney, gallery, and supports—was all aslant, and about to tumble into it.

The reputation of this abode was something on a par with its external appearance.

It was dwelt in by a woman who called herself a washerwoman, but who was believed to have very little, if any, employment that way—; a woman prematurely old with debauchery and drunkenness in appearance, and of a savagely ferocious and shrewish temper; who, after youth of the vileness that most disgraces her sex, was currently reported in her maturer years to have become the associate of thieves and profli gates of the lowest description, male and female, which the inferior corruption of that age could offer in a limited population such as Birmingham counted in the seventeenth century.

There was not even wanting a report that deeds more direful than robbery and pillage had occurred under this baleful roof. A pedlar whose body was found stripped and covered with wounds on the river and whose pack had disappeared, was strongly rumoured to have come by his ugly end beneath it.

But it was not for this reason that Cut-throat Meg, as she was called, had acquired that horrid nickname. The wretched creature had at tempted her own destruction at some period of her desperate career and the haggled scar that deformed her throat, and which she never took the trouble to conceal, remained to attest the dismal fact.

Congeniality of poverty, and rejection by their fellow humanity, probably, rather than other feeling, had led to the union that existed between this woman and the maimed Anabaptist soldier. It was strange but certain that they were lawfully man and wife. And still stranger that the terrible, almost unsexed fury of passion and debauchery, was known to cherish a fondness and admiration for her bargain approaching in themselves sufficiently nigh to insanity to be scarcely at times distinguishable from it in the signs. In particular, if jealousy be a proof of love, never was a man more loved than the battered Mokanna of the Black Chapel of Bordesley; and possibly, when he grew in power and influence as a teacher of his pernicious tenets, and women, always forward in religious novelties, gathered around him, the feeling was not so unfounded as it is said sometimes to be. Yet what could it have been at this period but the very frenzy of the passion that preyed upon her vitals, which dictated the feeling of ill-will that certainly animated Cut-throat Meg against the fair daughter of her husband's principal employer? For it was she who by her snarls had attempted to direct the anger and fears of the populace, on the news of Prince Rupert's arrival, upon Dorothy Firebrace.

Sisyphus found no difficulty in entering the abode presided over by his fearful partner. There was no door to the lower portion of the house, which was nearly choked with the gravel and dried-up ooze of an old inundation. The stairs that mounted to the dilapidated chambers above hung almost loose, and broken away in wide gaps from their supports. He had only to push back a piece of coarse tarpaulin nailed over a doorway at the top of these, to find himself amidst his household gods.

Few signs of comfort appeared. The numerous broken panes of the narrow lattices were supplied with rags and clouts that could not quite exclude the gracious light of the now rising moon. In one corner

there was a low truckle bed, covered with a mattress that revealed the straw it was stuffed with at various jags; with some bundles of black-looking coverlets, chiefly undressed sheepskins. A few other miserable articles of household furniture completed the poverty-stricken aspect of things. A scanty fire, aglow in a sort of tripod on the hearth, had, however, a pot suspended over it that gave some promise of supper in preparation. And before this, huddled in a heap like a toad, sat a woman whose gaunt frame, grim looks, and wildly-gleaming eyes, might well have furnished a painter with a study for the infernal goddess, Hecate. The bellows-blower might be forgiven for not doting to any excess upon such a consort.

Cut-throat Meg seemed also considerably out of temper, and received him in no very winning style.

'What do you here, man?' she said, glaring haggardly at him. 'Did I not send you word I would bring you your supper to the Parsonage, and sleep for one night under a whole roof? I trow me, that is like to be the best of your day's wages at soldiering!'

'I come here because I would not have you come there: we want no women at an outpost, and *that* lies naked to the enemy on the fieldside. Where's my supper?' replied Sisyphus, in the tones of an ogre snubbing his ogress.

'Here's your supper; help yourself from the pot: you are old enough to care not to scald your lips with a mess of oat porridge and onions. But deem you I am going to stay alone by myself in this darksome rat-hole, while you tumble in the parson's down beds? What care I for the King's soldiers at Aston? I never heard before you were so troubled to keep me safe.'

'Nay; you and they would likely be good friends enough, soon enough,' returned Sisyphus bitterly; 'and that is perhaps one reason why I will not have you so within hail-fellow-well-met of the jolly company! You shall tarry where you are, I say; at least until I know better where I shall myself remain for my lastingness.'

'I can tell you pretty well, methinks, without asking the Witch of Aston!' returned the kind consort, pointing significantly downwards.

'No; the man who has been your husband on earth can never deserve to meet with you again below,' Sisyphus responded. 'And, for my part, I know not how I can have merited, other than by wedding thee, a fall so utterly from grace, which I know was once granted to me. I never murdered a pedlar?'

'And who says I did? Is it thou, liar and traitor?' the woman answered, with fury in her accents, but turning deadly pale in the complexion. 'And even were't so, is not the receiver as bad as the thief? and did not the very children screech to thee in the street on our wedding-day that I bought my husband with the pedlar's stocking-foot?'

'Be that as it may, the pedlar or the pedlar's ghost may keep you company to-night, for I will not suffer you away with me; even such ruffians as I have gathered about me would think scandal of your presence,' Sisyphus replied.

'And is this the queening and sitting on a throne you promised me

when you courted me, wretched beggar and lousel as you returned among us from the wars?' said Cut-throat Meg. 'Fie on your lying, cheating tongue! nor am I the last or only one, I fear, it shall deceive. But you will not win the *armourer's fair daughter* by such witchery, old Devil's Claw! with the pick of all the handsome young fellows of town, and country too, offering themselves to her! and with her father's noble prisoner—for whose sake she puts herself in any jeopardy—an angel of light in the comparison of a demon with thee, broken handled glue-pot! And I'll take care, besides, that the people know enough of *her* goings on against them, some day, to tear her into calf's fritterlings?'

'Wilt thou hold peace, hag; or have all the hot gruel on thy grizly head? Or, dost thou see, some say you killed the pedlar with this very chopping-knife: did he seem to like of it so well that you would have a relish of it in your turn?' Sisyphus replied, flaming with hatred and malice.

'But where are *thy* hands to do murder even on a woman? Will thy bellows-hook steady the cleaver for my skull?' Cut-throat Meg retorted jeeringly. 'Why, it were easier far for me to send thee tumbling over the water stairs after the pedlar, than for thou to do me the mischief that would likely content thy black heart's greed! What ails me, indeed, that I do not tear thy false, upbraiding, woman-cheating tongue from its roots, at least?'

'Silence, madwoman!—hear you not that splash and struggling sound without in the gallery? Oh, can it truly be that the dead—that murdered men long buried, but unavenged, in their graves, can thus return to flout their murderers with dismal repetition of the deed? Hark! did ye drag him with that dripping splash of gore, to heave him over? Good Heaven! what means it else?'

And the Anabaptist started up with an expression of intense superstitious terror in his aghast countenance, staring in the direction of the sounds he thus described, which were certainly audible on the exterior of the crazy pile towards the river.

But this excitement was as nothing compared with the horror of dread that took possession of every fibre of his guilty partner's frame. She shook and trembled, the powerful virago, in every limb of her gaunt frame; and clinging with abject fear to her husband's knees, 'Save me, oh, save me!' she yelled in a scarcely human outcry. 'Didst not tell me thou hadst power given thee to pardon and absolve, as one endowed by Heaven with a special inward grace, that flowed out on whom thou willedst to save? I gave thee all the silver and the price of the goods that I could sell for the blood, to spend on thine own luxuries; and now keep the avenger off *me*!'

But Sisyphus's own consternation had culminated in the fact that a clout was suddenly removed from a shattered pane, and a ghastly visage, seemingly hung with black weedy mud, presented itself thereat.

'Mercy of mercies on me, liar and cheat that I am! It is there, it is there, it is there! But I never harmed thee, poor slain fellow-creature! I never killed but in fair fight! It was before my time. This is the murderess, and take her with you where you will!'

'Sisyphus ! Brother Sisyphus ! is it indeed you ?' said a most doleful voice now at the opening.

'Master Richard Grimsorwe ! Am I dreaming, or mad ?'

'No, no ; it is I myself—none other—most vilely cozened, maltreated, stripped of my habiliments, thrown into this foul sewer rather than river, whence I have with such difficulty and slipperiness dragged myself, that I seem like a severed worm writhing to find its parts again !' groaned the voice. 'In the name of Heaven, let me in, good friend, and cleanse me of this mud and filth, that I may make my escape with what speed is possible from this accursed town !'

'It is a living man's voice ; it is not Jacob Futvoye's !' exclaimed Cut-throat Meg, reviving in an instant from her fit of conscience and dread. 'Let us let him in ; perhaps he may make it worth our while, unless he be choused of all.' And even then, if he be of the town—and you seem to know him, Sisyphus—he hath been belike at no good, and must pay us to keep counsel !'

'Know him ? ay, in truth. But how *here*, and how *there*, at the same moment ? Come in, Master Grimsorwe, I pray you, come in ; there is no way but by the lattice ! And is it, indeed, you yourself, whom I met but half an hour ago in your fine black lawyer's robe, with your hair hanging like a mane to your girdle, on a steed that seemed to dance the air like the bonny bluebell ?'

Speaking thus, the bellows-blower thrust the crazy casement so violently back on its rusty hinges that it fell half off, but allowed a space at which the person addressed scrambled headlong in. Then, regaining his feet, presented such a streaming mass of mud, weeds, rotten sticks and straws, and other river-filth, clinging round the likeness of a man, that Cut-throat Meg herself, albeit not given to the laughing mood, burst into a discordant clatter of the kind.

Not so Richard Grimsorwe. No sooner had he heard the words uttered by Sisyphus than he exclaimed, 'Oh, then, I see the whole treason now ! By that malignant girl's contrivance Edward Holte has escaped the town, disguised in my garb ! All is lost for me at Aston—and my only redemption lies in the success of the Parliament captain's plan ! But what if they have discovered *that* too, and Edward hastens to reveal it ? Miserable wretch that I am ! the brutal giant that cast me into the river at the forge has so wrenched my limbs that I cannot stand, much less rush, as I ought, to set Cromwell in pursuit. What shall I do ? I may seem to you, Sisyphus, to rave ; but if Holte has gone to Aston there may yet be time to pass his intelligence and secure the King ! Hasten with my words to the captain, good fellow ! hasten, and the reward I promised you—for another service—shall be doubled. Hasten ! I have not breath to explain, for my very soul is gorged with mud and slime, and my heart choked with them—and I can gasp no more !'

Indeed Grimsorwe seemed all but suffocated, and the convulsive action of disgust that heaved his whole bedraggled frame attested the efforts of nature to be rid of, it is probable, divers very unpalatable and unwillingly swallowed substances.

But Sisyphus waited not the result. He perceived too plainly himself the whole breathless imminence of the case.

'Attend to the misused, worthy gentleman, wife,' he exclaimed; 'do him what service you can. But life and death hang on my speed now back to Captain Cromwell's quarters! Fare you well, sir, for a space! Meg, *put the chopper by*, and get your guest to bed!'

CHAPTER XLV.

THE WITCH-MEETING.

THE comparison of notes among his enemies has certified the success of Edward Holte's plan of escape; so far, at least, as the then centre of Birmingham, at the Bull Ring. Thence let us now follow his flight.

Hazardous as he left the position of affairs in the Crown House, Edward had, however, too much good sense to attract attention by using any wild speed in his departure from Deritend. He found the horse on which Grimsorwe had arrived at the street gate, mounted it deliberately, gave the man the like niggardly fee that Grimsorwe would have given, and rode deliberately off. He could not help thinking, at the same time, that the steed recognised its proper master, from the thrill that visited its frame, the pleased snort it gave, and the lively action it exhibited at once.

Edward restrained this, however, as he passed up Digbeth; and he was proceeding at a very quiet pace across the dark inclosure before St. Martin's Church, when he encountered with Sisyphus, on his way to Cromwell's quarters.

Up to this period Edward had internally resolved to proceed at once to Aston Hall, which lay not much out of his direct route north, with intelligence of the danger impending. Something, he thought, might be effected by the cavalry posted there in delaying the calamitous project formed to surprise the person of the King. But what he now learned convinced him that direct action, and at the utmost speed of horse and man, could alone be useful in the conjuncture.

Believing he spoke to Richard Grimsorwe, Sisyphus informed Edward Holte of the utterly exhausted condition of Prince Rupert's party of horse. All the impetus of the fiery leader himself, and entreaties of Sir Thomas Holte, could not get the wearied troopers to renew the attempt to enter Birmingham that night. The other officers themselves remonstrated with his Highness. Yielding to necessity, therefore, he had quartered them around Aston Hall, where, for the most part, they were now buried in sleep, and heavy with the strong ales liberally provided for their use by the baronet.

This intelligence could not be doubted, the Anabaptist said, since it was brought to him by so faithful though secret a friend of the *good cause* as Adam Blackjack, and by the order and instruction of Maud Grimsorwe!

Edward learned with alarm and horror the treachery and betrayal rife even in his father's household. But he saw that nothing could be hoped

from open resistance. He had little fear, or rather the reverse emotion, that Cromwell would be turned from his grand object by any aside bait. He knew not well how otherwise to sustain his brother's personation, and get rid of the bellows-blower. The safety of the King was, besides, now the all-in-all business. Happen what might to Prince Rupert and his company—to his own family even—the devoted cavalier conceived it proper to provide for that against all risks. He therefore desired Sisyphus to hasten at once with his news to Captain Cromwell, and point out to him how easily the destruction of this detached corps might be effected in an unexpected onslaught.

Sisyphus proceeded on his way, and Edward Holte on his; the former no doubt more convinced than ever of his ally's superiority to every feeling of kinship and natural duty in his eagerness to advance himself in his brother's place.

Edward had yet to pass through some danger of detection when he reached the exit of the town towards Aston, at the Butts. But luckily the moon had not yet risen, and the men on guard there were very weary with their day's anxiety and vigilance. William Moorcroft imagined he perfectly recognised Master Grimsorwe, carelessly examined his pass by the light of a lantern, bade his late treater a civil good-night, and God speed, and a portion of the barriers was cleared away to allow him to pass out.

Losing then no diligence, Edward rapidly skirted the long wall of Aston Park until it came to a sharp angle, where the inclosure turned off to the left. Directly fronting this lay Sutton Chace, the road through which formed a cross with the proper one for him to pursue, which lay to the right, into Leicestershire.

Edward Holte was well acquainted with the country he had to traverse, being, like most persons of his age and class, a keen hunter, and accustomed to follow the hounds great distances over it. He had no hesitation, therefore, about the way he should take, when he reached this point. Nevertheless, he reined up his horse suddenly as he came in sight of the spot, with an emotion of the greatest astonishment and wonder. Nay, perhaps—so universally diffused and rooted were the superstitions of the time—with no slight sensation of fear.

Not without a cause! Precisely in the centre of the cross-road, beyond which on all sides extended a dreary, heath-like open country, he beheld a great fire kindled. Over this was suspended an iron pot or caldron, from three iron bars united in a triangular support. This pot, from its bubbling, contained some thick liquid, and as it was red-hot externally, the astonished spectator could not but conclude it contained some metal in a state of fusion.

And yet he was at full liberty to form the notion that some more horrible ingredients mingled in the contents. A very old man, almost idiotic with age, whom he recognised as the gravedigger of Aston churchyard, stood with a mouldy basket in his hand, in which there seemed bones and soil and some horrid rags that looked like the stained swathings of a corpse! And from it a most witch-like female figure—nay, the too well-known figure of the Witch of Aston herself—was busy ladling stuff into the caldron. And as if all this had been little and

could leave much doubt of the dismal certainties of the scene, all around, in the glow of the fire, sat some four or five horrible-looking old women, the terrors of their several districts, but mostly so infirm, rheumatic, and stricken with all the ailments of age and poverty, that it was a wonder, truly, how they had reached the place of the witch-meeting. Nothing but dotage, mingled with malice, curiosity, a vague belief in the dreadful powers ascribed to them by the folly and superstition of the age, and the influence of their grizzly chieftainess over them, could have given them the necessary energy—unless, perhaps, it was the temptation of the ardent spirit that, in all probability, circulated in certain transparent and singularly beautiful amber goblets among them, and renewed for awhile the glow and life of youth in their time-drained veins.

Edward Holte was learned in the learning of his times, of polished manners and superior intellect. But he belonged to his times, and doubted not that he had come upon a *sabbath*, or assemblage of witches in the devil's name. The appearance of the group, the business in which they seemed engaged, the midnight hour—such it now was—the unlucky and ill-omened place of meeting—all conspired to force the notion upon him.

Unlucky and ill-omened to the Holte race certainly as well as to others which might be considered to have received injuries by their agency on this spot.

There it was that the ancestor of Tubal Bromycham had been so basely trepanned by the robbers, who afterwards pretended he had committed a felony with them on the person of a Holte. There it was that the miserable daughter of Maud Grimsorwe, and mother of Richard, had been interred, with all the horrors of the old laws against a suicide—a *felo de se*, as the phrase ran—with a stake through her breast on a cross-road !

Her grave was plainly to be seen at the junction of the cross-road from Aston to Sutton, inasmuch as her mother's care had now for nearly thirty years kept the ground in good order, and mostly at the flower seasons bright with violet and primrose or wallflower and rose. The poor old wretch had even at one time a custom to buy a lamb in the spring and employ its tender teeth to crop the grass. But as the lamb was invariably stolen and butchered, in spite of the terrors of the witch, the frugal Richard had, of latter years, persuaded his grandmother not to indulge in so unsuspected and costly a piece of sentiment.

Yet here it was that the woe-begone hag had collected her friends and *cummers* at this midnight hour, evidently to keep her company and assist in some direful rites that shunned the light of day and the observation of mankind ; how could Edward Holte doubt of what diabolical nature when only a few years had elapsed since an Act of Parliament had been passed expressly forbidding the assemblage of witches on their unhallowed operations, and when persons exactly resembling in aspect and condition those before him were constantly undergoing the most dreadful tortures and capital punishment for the crime of sorcery, in all its forms and degrees ?

So thunderstruck with amazement and dread he was, that the momentous nature of his own business passed for awhile from his recol-

lection. And it is doubtful how long he would have remained transfixed and gazing, had not his steed, alarmed at the glare and smoke before it, uttered the usual cry of a startled animal of its kind.

In a moment a panic seemed to take nearly the entire assemblage. The gravedigger flung down his basket of dreadful relics; the old women who were squatting around jumped up and scudded off like frightened toads; and only Maud Grimsorwe seemed to have sufficient courage to remain. And she, turning her withered countenance round, with her back to the glowing gipsy fire, rather shrieked than said, 'The spell is of power—the spell is of power! My child has answered from her grave in this apparition, and her son shall be Lord of Aston Hall!'

Edward comprehended immediately, from recollection of an example with which a play of the great Warwickshire worthy had familiarised all England, that the dreadful old woman had been engaged in magical rites to ascertain the probabilities of her grandson's success in his criminal enterprises. The exclamation reminded him to continue his personation on an occasion when discovery would add so much to his risks. Even he fancied he spied some advantage in the circumstance.

He spurred his horse on; which unwillingly, and with restive action, approached the blaze.

'I am no apparition, grandmother!' he said, in muffled accents, fearful of his ability to deceive ears so accustomed to the true tones of Grimsorwe's voice, and passing his horse beyond the hideous glare. 'But your prayers, if even they be to the Evil One, have proved of great influence in my behalf. The Parliament has received me among its adherents, and released me. But intelligence of my doings has been carried to Aston before me, and I am now flying from my father's anger and the cavaliers where best I may! Be sure, then, whoever overtakes me, misinform them of the way I have taken. I mean to make for Erdington; but say I have fled over Sutton Chace!'

Even as he spoke a distant trampling of horses' hoofs came to his ears, as well as to those of the witch, who listened with apparent bewilderment.

'Ho, ho! Black Tom, Black Tom! art thou deceiving me?' she muttered. 'How shall my grandson be Lord of Aston, and flee thence for his life? And the cavaliers following him on the wind, whom I myself saw so lately all but dead asleep with weariness and drink?'

Edward had not, until now, noticed that the witch's favourite companion, her starveling cat, formed a portion of the company, and had not stirred from the comfortable glow of the fire, in the general consternation, but remained purring and singing contentedly before it.

'Yes, yes, the cavaliers—a fresh party of them—you will know them by their bright armour—but with Prince Rupert still at their head,' Edward hurriedly rejoined. 'Hark! they come. He is the son of a crownless king. Strive and detain him with some fine promise that he shalt be a king himself in good time; hear you! anything to delay and misdirect.'

The old woman brisking up at the prospect of mischief, Edward waved his hand in parting, and taking his proper right-hand road, bade

her once again be sure and say he had taken the left, and might be speedily overtaken. But swift indeed must have been the rider who could have overtaken him, when upon that he jerked the rein towards Erdington Woods

CHAPTER XLVI.

A PURITAN 'MACBETH' AND 'BANQUO.'

THE sorceress herself, however, remained on the scene of action, considerably puzzled.

'What can it all mean?' she muttered, tossing back her white tattered locks in the wind. 'It was Sir Thomas Holte himself, or Adam Black jack lied, who desired me to summon my witch-friends here—poor dotard!—under assurance of his protection, and cast a spell by which what is coming to pass in these strange times should be known. He may well wish to learn, wealthy and endangered as he is; and his dead children attest my power to him from their graves! My curses killed *them* doubtless! Yet I never cursed young Edward, and he is going they say, to lay his goodly head upon the block in London. My grandson must be endowed with an equal power to harm with his ill wishes. And yet he himself, it seems, is detected, and flying a banished wretch from his father's indignation. I know not if it will be of use now, if Sir Thomas comes to warn him, as I purpose that his house and name will never be built on any secure foundation, but shall pass away like a dream, unless he acknowledges my daughter's son for his true heir. No man, nor woman either, can dispute he is the *elder-born*!'

The old woman's perplexity now changed its course.

'Strange, too,' she thought, 'flying at so breathless a speed from a company of worn-out men, who slept but shortly ago as if death had strewn the straw in the barns and outhouses they are lying in at Aston. So that, although some cursed me for a witch when I peeped in, not a horse-trooper of them all raised his tired arm to smite me. My troth! if all speeds well with Richard's contrivances in Birmingham, some of them will sleep the sounder to-night. No other male heir will remain when Edward's head is off, and so Sir Thomas must needs be reconciled to him. Yet was it Richard who passed just now, or some illusion of the Foul One? Hath the Demon listened to me at last, after so often calling upon him in vain with my curses? Or is he putting a cheat upon me, as they say is chiefly the Old Deceiver's wont, when he seems to grant prayers made to him? The phantom showed most like my grandson Richard, it is true; the hair and tawny skin were his, but were the eyes and voice altogether so?'

Perplexed with growing suspicion, the witch still felt she could not be mistaken in the rapidly nearing thud of horses' galloping that came to her hearing.

This recalled her to the propriety of getting things in readiness for the new arrival; and she called to her dispersed companions to return.

'Nan Crookshank—Malkin of the Dyke—Winnie Crossbone ! Where are ye all ? Come, my bats ! come, my howlikins ! come, my she-rats without tails ! good friends, come ! There is a jolly bake of offals from the Hall, for ye to share when the work's done, of the meal Adam Black-jack served whole to a Royal Prince this eve ! What's your fear, sisters ? We meet to-night by full permission, with the great man of Aston himself for a visitor.'

Some of the old women answered, but in distant screech-owl notes : 'Faggots and fire ; Faggots and fire ! Come away, Maud, mother ! Come away ! The devil himself cannot save us if once they get us into the flames !'

'Base-spirited hags ! incapable of any good vengeance ! Let them go—what care I ?' muttered Maud Grimsorve. 'Yet I gave them a bumper of *aqua vite* to put some courage in their marrowless old bones, and in the very cups from Sir Thomas's most careful stores, which Adam Blackjack would have me show to convince him I have the secret to walk his house invisibly, and steal ! Would I had : neither silver nor gold should long deck his sideboard, unless my grandson were declared the true inheritor. But what is all this clatter now upon the wind ? The pursuers come !'

Even as the wretched old creature uttered these words, two horsemen, in new and brightly polished suits of armour, appeared in sight, riding at the stretch of their powerfully-limbed chargers' speed. There was also a third in their company, almost abreast ; but he was a ragged lad, and rode bareback, with nothing but a halter in the mouth of a shaggy-looking pony to guide its advance.

These were Cromwell and Lambert, with their tinker guide, who, on the information of the bellows-blower, had started in pursuit of Edward Holte, and at a speed which it was evident had distanced the main body of newly-equipped dragoons, though it was probable it was not far in the rear.

The spectacle that had alarmed Edward Holte was somewhat diminished in effect by the absence of most of the other hags. But enough, it was plain, remained to challenge wonder and observation.

The furnace fire still threw its crimson glare. The unhallowed mixture still bubbled in the pot, and the moon having risen over the dreary heath which formed a considerable portion of Sutton Chace, illumined with a ghastly pallor the wild and weird figure of the Witch of Aston, as she stood seemingly awaiting the approach.

All this together produced a mingled exclamation of surprise and dismay on the part of the riders, and the three unanimously did as Edward had done—came to a sudden halt.

'What's this ?' exclaimed Lambert. 'What strange woman have we here out on a desert place at midnight, who makes such signs of forbidding at us with her outstretched skinny arms ?'

'It is a WITCH !' gasped the tinker boy, cowering as if to fall from his horse with dread.

'Indeed, but things look very like it ; very like it, truly !' said Cromwell, also in singularly panic-stricken accents. 'I do remember me, in my unregenerate days, such a wild wretch as this they showed us for

a witch at the Blackfriars' Theatre, that the playerman, William Shakespeare—who, they say, knew the secrets of both worlds—did devise and place before men's eyes.'

'Yonder, also, are the blasted heath and the aghast moon ! Even in such a spot as this, truly, might he—being, as they say, a night poacher in woods and outlands in his youth—have come upon creatures like this. And was he not of this Warwick county himself?' returned Lambert.

'Let us go no further, sirs ! The witch will put some black cross upon us, turn us into dogs and familiars, or ride us up and down the sky on broomsticks, mayhap !' said Bunyan, quite in earnest, and terrified, in the remark.

'The Lord being with us, what should we fear ? Let us tax her with her unlawful dealings, for there are many statutes of most heavy charge, in the late King's reign, against all manner of witchcraft and incantations, upon which she seems now busy,' said Lambert, who had been a lawyer before he took to soldiering.

'But let us be advised, brother, how we proceed,' Cromwell replied, with strange tremulousness. 'I tell you there was an ancestress of mine own, my Lady Cromwell, wife to Sir Samuel Cromwell of Huntingdon, who was done to death by charms and spells. But you must needs have heard of the witches of Warbors, some fifty years ago ? Let us speak her fair and pass, until such time as we have better leisure for judgment and fulfilment of the law on this woman of Belial. Come on, boy ; why do you shrink and tremble thus behind ?'

'It is my beast that will no further ; his shoes are clammed to the ground ; I cannot move him by a step !' returned the lad, who was holding his nag's head as tight in the halter as if he had meant to strangle it.

'I believe thou liest,' said Cromwell, 'but we cannot do without thee ; loosen the rope, or look to have it twisted as close round thine own neck. Come on, John Lambert ; we must clear this vermin out of the road, or none of our following will dare to keep it !'

And putting evidently a strong force on his own reluctance, the captain resumed his advance, clutching the halter of the tinker guide's horse to make it keep pace. The boy writhed and trembled, but could not help submitting unless he had slipped from his seat, which once or twice seemed likely enough.

Lambert himself, who had spoken most valiantly of the three at first, now held back, and was the last in the advance.

'What manner of woman are you, out on this lone spot at midnight—if woman you be ?' said Cromwell, when they were nigh enough to be distinctly heard ; but his voice quivered more than ever, strive to control the emotion as he might.

Maud Grimsorve hesitated in her reply. She was aware of the penalties attached to the possession of the privileges of a witch ; and tempted as the decrepit old wretch felt by the pride of diffusing fear, the consideration probably restrained her.

'I am a poor old woman, sir,' she accordingly answered, after a pause, 'and time has so nigh done with me, neither do I take much

note of time, if it be midnight, as you say. I am boiling a mash for some calving cows that feed out on the Chace, the male folks being very busy now with the soldiers at Aston Hall.'

'It is a strange-looking hodge-podge, howsoever, mistress,' said Lambert, peering into the caldron, and turning deadly pale. 'The mess seems to me more like unto boiling and bubbling blood than aught else; and if I am not much mistaken, that is a grinning human jawbone sharking at us from the hell-looth.'

'The colour is but the glare of the red flames, my master,' returned the old woman, scornfully; 'and what you espy as grinning teeth are acorns, to make the mash bitterly medicinal.'

'Peace, lieutenant,' resumed Cromwell; 'it is likely enough what the old woman says. I was a cattle-man myself once, and we gave our calving kine warm mashes of the sort. But, now tell me, mother (we must speak the devil fair sometimes, I tell thee, John!) have you seen a man on horseback pass this way, in a lawyer's robe? and if so, how went he?'

'In a lawyer's robe? Truly, yes,' the hag readily replied; 'and yonder along the White Walk, over Sutton Chace, he took his way, galloping as if he were at race with the wind, and from the gallows!'

'Is yonder our turn outward to Nottingham, boy?' said Cromwell to the tinker.

The lad could hardly answer for the chattering of his teeth; but he made shift to let it be known that the one indicated was the reverse of the right turning, until the witch's threatening glare fell upon him, when he broke off inarticulate with fear.

'If it be not Nottingham way, our game shall not take us off on a cross scent,' Cromwell observed on this. 'Let him go his road, as we will ours. Proceed in our guidance, boy; we may take it the more leisurely—that's all.'

'Do so, and a dry canker shall wither up thy bones, boy, till they crack from thee like rotten twigs from a bush!' the witch now exclaimed, thrown off her guard by her own apprehensions for her supposed grandson's safety, in fierce and menacing accents.

'Refuse, and I will hang thee up as firmly as the greenest oak branch in thine own fancy rope rein!' returned Cromwell, provoked out of his own fears with this interference, which seemed also to confess the attempted deception. 'And for you, foul witch, betake yourself out of all Christian presence at once, or I will overturn your mess, and try if you will not scald before you burn!'

'Proud fool! you could not harm me; and I bid you, in your turn, beware what you do! Ruin and overthrow await you on this road if you pursue it; and mere harmless village dogs shall go wolfish to devour all of your company!'

'I will believe heaven rather than hell, which hath promised me a good success,' returned Cromwell. 'Avoid the way, then, beldam, or I will override your shrivelled carcass to follow on't!'

'You speak greatly, master. But I tell you "There is many a slip between the cup and the lip:" and though Charles Stuart and all his family shall perish from the land, and you shall sit on the throne of their

desolation, you shall be but the mockery and shadow of a KING, and the gibbet shall swing your rotten bones at last ! But the blood is not yet shed which must flood you to that height ; and, though I wish you the devil's speed in your work, 'tis but a poor beginning you make now, to serve an old dotard's rage upon his son's life !

'A king ! Captain, you shall be a *king*, she says,' Lambert repeated sneeringly. 'Prithee, then, good woman—since fair words trade so well with you—what fortune do you predict to me ?'

'To be your *master's ape* ! What more for such as thou art ?' the hag replied, with extreme bitterness.

'Thank you, that 'tis nothing worse. You might have predicted a descent of kings from me, and so got me my throat cut some night in a ditch, on my master's coronation day ; for look how he muses over your raving lies,' said Lambert, mockingly ; but he was plainly much annoyed with the retort.

Cromwell, on his part, seemed offended with his lieutenant's allusion.

'Your head runs on a rantipole play, methinks, Lambert, and you see not how far this poor old woman's wits are astray, talking on as if we were thief-takers riding in a pursuit,' he observed. 'But at present, lieutenant, I charge you place so much credence on her words as to follow the escaped prisoner in the direction she gives ; and if you overtake him, and he refuses to stay, kill him at once, without mercy ! On my part, I will but wait till the troop comes up to proceed on the main enterprise.'

'Methinks, sir, I should have some others with me also ; the man is desperate, and escaped well armed,' returned Lambert sulkily.

'How, do you dispute my orders, lieutenant ?' resumed Cromwell, angrily and imperiously. 'Why, man, if I bade you attack a score, you should do it ; and I send one armed man against but another now.'

'You are my officer, truly, sir,' Lambert replied doggedly, 'and I must obey you. God be with you, captain, and do not listen to any temptings of the fiend from this weird woman's lips. Was Saul the wiser unto salvation of himself or his host when he questioned her of Endor ?'

He was then about to turn on the cross-road to the left over Sutton Chace, when a strange voice was heard from the angle of the wall over where this lurid scene took place. It exclaimed, in accents of fierce satisfaction, 'Ha, hag-witch ! have I detected you at last at your sorceries ? Look to broil at a stake for this, were you ten times Richard Grimsorwe's grandam !'

A strong-built man dragged himself up by the hands to the top of the wall, as the words were uttered. But neither he nor another, who raised himself by the same means at the corresponding angle of the wall, expected the spectacle that presented itself.

The latter was yelling out, 'Now, witch, I cast off thy power and dominion for ever ! So Sir Thomas has seen thee at thy witchcrafts, and——what armed men be these ?'

The two first persons who arrived were Sir Thomas Holte and Adam Blackjack, who had fallen, apparently, upon a trick to seduce the Witch of Aston into a betrayal of her true qualities, and in a manner not to be

mistaken—an effort to throw off the yoke that certainly partook of the disorder of the master-cook's mind, and very twilight sense of morality.

Maud Grimsorwe stared, in complete bewilderment, at the whole party.

'Is not this man the Prince Palatine, whom you allow to pursue your son Richard to destruction, Sir Thomas Holte?' she exclaimed.

'She is surely a madwoman, if these are real living men and soldiers. But how in nature can they be the Prince's troop, whom we left all fast asleep at Aston?' said Sir Thomas, almost equally astonished.

While he spoke, a redoubled and numerous trampling announced the approach of the main body of Cromwell's troopers.

In a few moments a long line, glittering in the new steel armour from Firebrace's forge, flashed past the astounded gaze of the baronet and his domestic. But just as they arrived the witch threw something into the fire which exploded, and sent volumes of sulphureous smoke around, and for awhile darkened everything.

Very considerable confusion, amounting indeed to panic, seized upon the entire body of Cromwell's troopers upon this alarming reception.

In vain, shaking himself up from a kind of lethargy, of brooding over what he had heard, the Parliament captain's voice rang out in loud and inspiring words of rally and command. The horses, bestrid by those fear-struck riders, either became unmanageable, or followed the blind impulses of their riders' terror. When the smoke cleared away, the furnace was extinguished, the pot blown to atoms, the witch and the two detective observers over the wall had disappeared, and Cromwell found himself completely alone on the cross-road, with his troopers scattered in all directions, but chiefly over the open lands of Sutton Chace.

Much time was, of course, lost in the effort to reassemble the soldiery; and when they collected in any number, it was at a considerable distance from the proper high road, near the ancient royal Manor House of the district. Most of the paths and by-ways taken by the affrighted troopers converged on that.

But even when his corps was reassembled, Cromwell perceived very plainly that all hopes of a successful prosecution of his enterprise were at an end.

The superstition of the times and of his men was equal to their fanaticism, and somehow or other the report had become universal among the Ironsides that a witch had crossed their captain's path, and had denounced the enterprise on which they were going as certain to lead to the destruction of all concerned.

So far they had followed their leader implicitly, without knowing whither: but now a general, a panic-stricken murmuring at the prosecution of the design—equally unknown as it continued—reached Cromwell's cognisance; and, with the true tact of a leader, he felt it would be in vain to urge a project of so much hazard and audacity upon men in such a state of reduced *morale*.

Lambert, perhaps, who was all along offended at not being trusted with the secret any more than the commonest trooper, took pains to spread reasons for distrust and fear. What much he guessed of the real object rather stirred the secret envy and rivalry in his bosom against his

chief, than any zeal to second him in an effort likely to lead to results so momentous, and which would thrust Cromwell on such sudden eminence.

It could not have been Bunyan, the only other sharer in the Witch of Aston's denunciation. The lad had taken the earliest advantage of the confusion to effect his escape completely from what he doubtless now looked upon as an office under a fearful ban.

The circumstance that he had no longer a guide, and was himself entirely ignorant of the country, had probably as great an influence as anything else in Cromwell's relinquishing the attempt on Nottingham. But this failure also compelled him to take into consideration that he had no longer the chance of a brilliant success to excuse an open and undeniable breach of orders direct from his general.

Nay, in the strangely disordered and affrighted state of his troopers' minds, he remembered with apprehension the nigh neighbourhood of the reckless Rupert and his cavalry, whom intelligence must now have reached, and whom a night's rest would put in condition for action.

To return to Birmingham without engaging and defeating the cavaliers, would be to place himself in a state of siege, in the midst of a town whose headstrong and divided counsels he felt he could not in such a case control any longer; or which might, on the strength of his presence, rush upon some ruinous demonstration of its own against the enemy.

On the other hand, his personal representations and influence might be exerted to induce the Earl of Essex and his officers to perceive the advantages of transferring the war to the neighbourhood of Birmingham. Its condition would probably soon call for active measures of relief, and the forward zeal it had exhibited in the cause would compel the Parliament to forward his representations in its favour. Perhaps the Earl might even be induced by a true statement of the case to advance the masses of his army upon the King at once; or his own friends in Parliament might be brought to urge the measure irresistibly on the public attention.

Upon these reflections—it could not surely be that the witch's threats had any influence!—the sagacious and usually calm-blooded leader came to the conclusion that he would right his whole position in a single effort, by announcing that he meant to proceed at once to join the Earl of Essex, in obedience to his orders, at Northampton.

He even gave it to be understood that such had all along been his intention, and that he had left Birmingham so clandestinely only to prevent himself from being annoyed by importunities to remain!

CHAPTER XLVII.

CHARLES. THE FIRST.

IF Edward Holte had known these facts, he need not have made such headlong haste as he did on his journey to Nottingham. But he conceived himself anticipating what might well prove a fatal surprise for the King, and consequently his whole party. And the generous steed he

bestrode seconding his impatience, horse and man arrived, all but exhausted at the gates of Nottingham about noon on the day after his midnight flight.

Every stage of the journey more than ever convinced Edward of the certainty of the danger incurred, and the great likelihood that success would have crowned Cromwell's audacious attempt.

There was not a single garrison, or even outlying post of the King, south of Nottingham; and most of the intervening country was known to be strongly disposed to the cause of the Parliament.

So obstinately rooted, however, were the King's opinions of the inviolability and majesty of his person and office, that he even cherished a belief that his subjects would never dare to meet him openly in the field. The supposed distance of any possible assailing force contributed to lull the vigilance of his scanty military attendance, and the news of Prince Rupert's victorious commencement of hostilities in Worcestershire, had recently arrived to swell the pride and confidence of the Royalists.

To complete the improvidence of the arrangements, the three or four hundred county militia who held the town for the King, and who were very slightly disciplined and ill-armed, were separated from the dilapidated old castle in which he resided by the rocky ravine surrounding it; and yet the approaches to the castle itself were no otherwise guarded; and the person of Charles I. was secured only by the swords of about sixty gentlemen, who had volunteered for the service, but whose high rank, and gay and careless habits, made them much fitter for courtiers than soldiers. Not to mention that they were perpetually quarrelling among themselves for position and favour with the King, and scarcely deigned to yield obedience to the captain he had placed over them, though allied to the royal blood.

Edward Holte distinctly perceived how easy it would have been for Cromwell to fall by surprise on the town, scatter the show of force collected in it, and thence have made his way into the castle. Inlet to that was easy; and the noble guard could have made but slight resistance in a fortress so ancient and ruinous that it was a fact none of the principal gates could be closed, and not even the precaution of a barricade had been raised in their stead.

Then again: strangely noticeable as was the whole exhausted and be-spattered apparition of Edward on his arrival, in so troublous a time, it seemed to excite scarcely any attention. He was taken to be simply one of the numerous messengers who were arriving from various parts in the King's interest. He passed unchallenged through the town; and could hardly be said to be questioned even with a glance until he arrived in the principal court-yard of the ancient pile, built by an illegitimate son of William the Conqueror, and white and ghostly, even in the bright morning sun, with age.

In truth, messengers had ceased for some time to excite any very favourable interest at the Court of Charles I. At this period they chiefly came with apologies for failures in promises, and craving for delay.

Since the erection of his standard, Charles had every reason to be dissatisfied with the results that had followed. Even the nobility and gentry most devoted to his cause seemed taken by surprise.

Considerable portions of them had indeed no wish, by too early and overwhelming a triumph, to establish the King in the despotism his own inclinations were sufficiently known to point to, as the natural issue of a conflict. His fifteen years of absolute personal government and tyranny made his latter promises and assurances distrusted by the majority even of his own party; and disinterested men still hoped to the last that some means less arbitrary than the sword might be found to compose differences. The Royalists especially, believing they had the real power when they chose to exert it, were very backward in comparison with the adherents of the Parliament, which knew better what it was about, and was set on its purposes with inexorable clearness of resolution and design.

Things, indeed, looked so untoward, that on the very morning of Edward Holte's arrival in Nottingham, a council had been held, in which some of the King's most trusted and faithful advisers earnestly urged upon him the propriety—the necessity even—of renewing proposals of peace to the Parliament.

This advice was, however, so distasteful to the proud and self-willed monarch, that he had broken up the assemblage in a disdainful and angry manner; declaring that if deserted by all those who had promised him their fidelity and adherence, in the maintenance of his just rights as King of England, he would rather perish by the sword of the meanest rebel trooper than humiliate himself to sue for 'pardon and mercy' to the insolent *Parliament of Westminster*.

So the King styled it, in distinction from the poor attempt at a rival one which he had lately assembled round himself at York.

In fact the principal councillors were leaving the presence of their irritated sovereign, who announced himself insulted by the base proposition made, at the moment Edward Holte rode into the castle-yard.

The King and his immediate attendants occupied the keep, or principal central pile of the building. Consequently, these grave personages—mostly with a rebuked and discontented look, and buzzing displeased remarks among themselves—were coming out to their respective lodgings in the fortress or the town. And it so happened that Edward's horse, being completely spent with the length and rapidity of its transit, stumbling over a loose stone, fell, after a slight stagger, so nigh the feet of one of the chief of these officials, that it was only by a hasty retreat he escaped a rather rude shock.

'Sain us! what manner of awkward rider is this, who stables his steed on our toes?' exclaimed the personage thus assailed, but without asperity.

'Not only the council, but the councillor, shall be *overridden* to-day, it seems, Sir Edward,' remarked another near him, with a facetious and good-humoured expression, which differed from that of most of his associates.

'It is no great wonder; we see by his robe that he is only expected to ride a legal hobby to market. 'Tis a gentleman of your own profession, Master Chancellor,' said a third person.

At this time Sir Edward Hyde—the future Lord Chancellor Clarendon—was only Chancellor of the Exchequer to Charles I.; and one not overburdened with ways and means.

'Not so, sir ; 'tis a disguise I have assumed to free myself from heavy thralldom and danger of my life, and to warn his Majesty of a most eminent approaching peril to his own, and the entire kingdom, so—I have scarcely breath—but for God's sake, let me see at once the gentleman who has the chief military command in his Majesty's quarters,' said Edward, and indeed in gasping pants for utterance.

'Danger to his Majesty's person ! Have I not said so and warned so a thousand times ? But how, sir, how ?' said a deep, melancholy voice, from one who had not yet spoken, but whose noble person, fine though sorrowful features, and general air of neglect and carelessness in his otherwise rich garb, could not fail to command attention.

But Edward Holte was struck with the appearance of this nobleman—for he seemed of rank—for another reason.

'Lose no time to question me, dear Lord Falkland. You will conceive well I am no idle newsmonger, when I tell you that I am your old school and college-fellow, Edward Holte, come post hither with strange news out of Warwickshire. Nay, you know me not for this black wig. Now, what say you ? Dear friend, no ; let us leave embracings for aftertime. Fly to Sir Jacob Astley, and tell him suddenly to close the gates of the town, call every man to arms, and stand on the defence of the castle and of the King's person for life or death, against a large party of Parliament horse coming at full pace from Birmingham.'

'From Birmingham !' exclaimed several at once.

'Surely it cannot be. We have heard of no force on the Parliament's part nigher than Worcester ; and that discouraged by a late defeat,' said Sir Edward Hyde.

'All will be lost, then, through incredulity. Lead me to the King himself, and I will speedily convince him. Meanwhile, no harm can be done by sounding the alert to the citizens and trainbands in the town,' returned the messenger, with a passionate excitement that supplied him with strength. 'Do you think I have ridden my good horse nigh to death for nothing ?'

'In truth do not I, my dear schoolfellow. My lords and sirs, I can testify to you this is a gentleman incapable alike of falsehood or unfounded fear. Come with me, Edward ; I will lead you myself at once to the King,' said the Lord Falkland.

'Good troth, then, I will see to the closing of the town on the word. Sir Jacob Astley is out hawking in the meadows below while we councillors were supposed to debate affairs,' said the good-humoured-looking personage who had before spoken.

'Do so, my lord Southampton ; and let some groom attend this poor beast with a bucket of water,' said the humane Falkland. And offering his arm at the same time to Edward, he added kindly, 'Lean well on me, dear friend ; I will be your guide to the presence of his Majesty.'

The help was very welcome and needful to Edward, who was stiff and faint with his long ride almost to an inability to move. He tottered, in fact, as if about to imitate his steed, for the first few steps. But luckily, a page passing with a ewer of water, Edward took a long drink from it, which greatly revived him, and then proceeded.

Lord Falkland kindly and prudently forbore to press the exhausted

visitor for particulars of his intelligence ; but he as considerably warned him that he should probably find the King in a very ungracious humour, and unwilling to be disturbed with any more disastrous news. 'Take your reception, whatever it may be, therefore, in good part, my dear friend, and answer his Majesty sharply and at once to the point. Indeed, your condition will suffer no otherwise. But here we are. Collect yourself for the effort ; we are close upon the guard chamber ; and what guard, you see, they keep !'

As he spoke, Falkland pushed open an unbarred door, black and worm-eaten with age, as if William Peverel himself had put it on the hinges ; and then a curious and unexpected scene presented itself. A number of men, in a uniform gorgeous with velvet and gold lace, but with armour laid aside in full security, sat in groups at different tables in a long gallery, drinking, smoking, throwing dice, playing at cards, laughing, talking, rollicking, in the noisy confusion and uproar of a barrack-room ; men nearly all of great quality and possessions, but who had even thus early adopted a tone of swaggering and debauchery as a distinguishing badge from the gravity and precision of their adversaries.

These guardsmen did not even notice the stranger's passage, though it is true the presence of Lord Falkland was a sufficient guarantee of his right to one.

A corridor thence conducted to a chamber in a circular tower at the end, and as there was no further let or hindrance, in a few moments Edward found himself introduced into the presence of the unfortunate sovereign, whose grandeur and fall present the most extraordinary and momentous catastrophe of history.

At the moment of Edward's entrance the King was seated in a deep recess of the round apartment in which they found him, writing by the full light which only in that part descended into its dark extent.

It looked like a haunted chamber of romance. The walls were hung with tapestry faded in all its figures to a ghostly indistinctness. The flooring creaked and crumbled as it was walked over, and was quite bare. The only good or even passable piece of furniture in the chamber was the desk at which the King was engaged, and which was a rich and elaborately finished piece of cabinet work, furnished with secret drawers, and curiously finished and ornamented in every detail. It is, in fact, the same preserved at Aston Hall, for the inspection of such of the curious as are allowed the privilege of a complete survey of the edifice and its contents.

At this the uxorious spouse of Henrietta Maria of France was engaged in composing a long and elaborate letter to his wife, accounting to her for the events of the day, and vaunting his own firmness and resolution in following up *her* ideas, in the rejection of peace on any terms but the full restoration of his abused power.

The numerous portraits of Charles I., executed by the greatest artists of his time, or of any time, have familiarised the world with his features and general expression ; but almost all of these were executed before his period of trouble and tribulation, when his court was reckoned among the most stately and magnificent of Europe, and he himself was

served in it with little less than the awe and majesty due to a being clothed with most of the attributes of a divinity.

Even at this early stage of his reverse of fortune the naturally austere and melancholy countenance of the King had become more than ever the mirror of his unluckily compounded character. It was still handsome and princely noble in the general features. But in spite of the pride and reserve that marked every line, something of irresolution and infirmity of purpose flickered over the pale but easily excited complexion, and quivered in the corners of the unhappy and depressed, though well-cut and ruddy mouth. Nor could the cold and peremptory glance of the bright grey eyes, which in some lights became blue, disguise the anxiety and suspicion that lurked in their depths, and gave even their severest and haughtiest scrutiny a character of internal puzzle and weakness, which his craftier counsellors well understood, and worked to their own ends.

The long curling chestnut-brown hair of Charles I. was already prematurely grizzled; and being subject in his youth to fits of stammering and hesitation, which he only remedied by speaking with great slowness and deliberation, this had now become an imposing and stately fashion with him, that gave all he said an air of being profoundly weighed and considered. But these circumstances made him seem older than he was; and the sombre richness of his apparel, which was chiefly of maroon or mulberry-coloured velvet, overspread on the shoulders with a collar of magnificent point lace, added to that effect.

To Edward Holte, however, this Prince was the incarnation of all that was great and august in human character and destiny; and if he saw him now shorn of some of his more glorious attributes, it was still the sun, though clouded by malignant vapours, which his worshipping gaze fell upon. Never knelt there a subject more loyal, heart and soul, than the heir of Aston Hall, when, the King turning sharply round on the noise of the entrance of his secretary with the unexpected visitor, Lord Falkland introduced him by name, and he sunk, utterly spent, on the floor, at the monarch's feet.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE COUNCIL OF WAR.

CHARLES himself appeared to have his natural sternness and arbitrary disposition, rather than his sympathies, roused by this display of emotion in a subject who presented himself so seemingly out of condition to render him the sort of assistance his affairs most required at the time.

'More excuses, is it, Falkland, instead of good weapons and stout men-at-arms to wield them?' the King said. 'If so, we are weary and desire to hear no more, come from what quarter soever they may. Consider your errand as done sir, then, when you have named your senders, and trouble not to card us the usual wind of words of loyalty and devotion in our ears.'

'My liege, the young gentleman is well nigh spent with his haste to do you a most substantial service,' interposed Lord Falkland. 'And your Majesty will the readier believe so when I repeat he is the son of Sir Thomas Holte, of Warwickshire, who——'

'We need no further reminding, my Lord Falkland,' interrupted Charles, with a flush of anger and disdain. 'We remember very well Sir Thomas was of the forwardest to send us offers of assistance, as he has since shown himself of the backwardest to keep any pace in performance of the same. Not only has he not sent us a single man or horse of a pretended troop of cavalry he was raising in our service, but, as we hear, the town of Birmingham, which is as it were directly under hand-stroke from his fine new palace at Aston—an unvalled and every way unsoldiered and unprovided town—has burst into open sedition and declared for the Parliament, while he looks helplessly, or perhaps approvingly, on.'

'Not so, sire, oh, not so!' Edward Holte now exclaimed, with re-kindled energy. 'My father has done all that lay in his power to fulfil his pledges to your Majesty: and no one knows so better than myself, his heir, who have barely escaped with my life from the fury of the misguided people there. But believe me, the townsmen of Birmingham are not in themselves so much to blame, as that they are in a manner driven on wild and desperate courses far beyond their inclinations by the wonderful zeal and industry in mischief of a noted Parliament man, who has lately taken to figuring among them in its name.'

'Why, so we have already heard, though not the traitor's quality or degree in treason. But what concerns it to know, when the least plotting villain of them all is a very giant caitiff of mutiny and insolence?' Charles replied; yet he continued in a milder way, 'Am I to understand, then, sir, you are the gentleman who was made prisoner on my behalf by those rebellious mechanics? and am I now to believe they have seen so speedily into the wickedness and danger of their sedition, and released you to be a suitor with me for pardon?'

Edward was obliged to reply that this was by no means the case; that he had escaped with difficulty, and with danger of his own life, to warn his Majesty of a most flagitious and audacious project formed on his sacred person itself by his enemies.

Charles looked at him now with visible alarm and anxiety. 'Design on our person! What, here in Nottingham? Is the taint spread among our very servants and followers then? Stand up, man, and tell your story, instead of gasping like a stranded fish on the floor at our feet.'

Edward complied with this ungracious command with a vivacity and spirit that perhaps rather startled the King. 'What now, my Lord Falkland? Do you say you know the messenger?' he exclaimed.

'And can answer for his fidelity, sire, and perfect trustworthiness, with my own life.'

'Well, then, say on, sir; I would trust Judas on my Lord Falkland's assurance, and am as attentive to you as a man should be who is said to have a life-deep stake in your utterances,' said Charles.

Edward Holte felt both chilled and repelled by the kind of reception he experienced, but perhaps he derived more courage from it than he

might from a kinder one. Accordingly he no longer hesitated, but revealed to the King the project formed to surprise his person by a party of cavalry secretly brought to Birmingham, and flung upon Nottingham thence, and which in all probability he only anticipated by the briefest interval.

Charles seemed incredulous for some moments that so audacious an act of treason and malice against his royal person could really enter the head of his hardest opposer. But when he precipitately inquired who had dared to project putting such an unimaginable villainy in execution, and learned, a very singular and powerful effect was produced upon him,

'*Cromwell!*—Captain Cromwell!—one of the Cromwells of Hinchinbroke, deem you? Heard you ever the man's Christian name, if such a ruffian can be said to have one? Was it Oliver—*Oliver* Cromwell?'

And the King's countenance changed as he pronounced the fated name, and a shadow seemed to pass over his spirit, as the ancient tradition affirms even the towering genius of Cæsar ever sunk rebuked in the presence of Brutus.

'Oliver, doubtless, sire, is the man's name who has stirred up the artisans of Birmingham, in ignorance rather than malice, against your Royal cause; for I am sure, at all events, the principal persons of the town have been made his instruments very unwillingly, and are showing evident signs how far beyond their own meaning and intents they are pushed by the man's desperation and the mutinous spirit of the rabble, always desirous of changes, and averse to lawful yokes and restraint.'

Charles gave a deep sigh as he listened; so deep that Lord Falkland looked at him with his own sorrowful countenance intensified in its characteristic expression.

'It is even so, then,' the King remarked, evidently as if in explanation, 'and *Oliver Cromwell* has grown to be the man of a most audacious and unrespective boy. I marvel not that if any man in England should be found to project so towering a treason, this should be the man. I do remember me, when I was Prince, being on a certain occasion of one of my late father, King James's, royal progresses, at this fellow's uncle's house near Huntingdon; when, having the insolence to quarrel me at some remark I made on his clownish gait and demeanour, on my offering to chastise him, the big varlet struck at me, and hurt me much. Yea, and that same night, woke up the whole house with some mad-brained vision of a giantess, that came to his bedside, and offered him—as he openly stuttered to all who would hear—a royal crown! My father was not angry until then, although I had complained with bitter tears of the indignity put upon me; and still old Sir Oliver found a way to soothe him through his favourite theories, with assurances that the boy's family had been under ban of a witch for more than half a century, which set them, mostly against their wills, on all manner of mad defiance and risks.'

'But these are times for madmen to flourish in, sire,' Lord Falkland responded.

'Ay, so it seems, dear Lucius,' Charles replied, in kinder and softened tones, 'and I do fear me now, more than ever, they can only be cured as madmen are, by letting of blood; by whips and straw, and dark

chaining to dungeon floors. And, oh ! but it contents me ill that I must be the harsh phlebotomist and flagellating keeper of my state. What says our own Willie Shakespeare, whom we both love so well ?

‘ “The times are out of joint ; oh, cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set them right.” ’

‘ Such a man of forward action, truly, is more dangerous than the most silver-tongued talker of those against us, sire,’ Lord Falkland rejoined ; ‘ and methinks your Highness owes much thanks to the zeal and prudence of this young gentleman in warning you betimes of his purposes.’

‘ Well, and I thank him ; but I should owe a broad-landed lordship to him who had brought me the traitor’s head,’ Charles observed. ‘ Well, well, the time may come. *Patience, patience !* True, it is a word that is growing a little wearisome in my vocabulary ; yet it is my great comfort and consolation against the injuries and insults of the times. God is patient also ; yet ever and anon He clears the skies with thunder or the earth with deluges of fire or water. My turn may come.’

‘ But when it come, sire——’

‘ Tut, tut ; I know thy chime now by heart, if ever I shall. “ Pardon and peace ; peace and pardon ! ” Is not this the everlasting ding-dong, my soft-souled Lucius, but not Junius or Brutus ? Ha ! you know not what it is to be a king, and feel the royal majesty of one so trodden upon in the dust as mine hath been ! My purple robes trampled by such a swinish hue and cry as drove at my heels when I left London last ! I must return thither on the wings of destruction, and sweep the way clear with a besom of fire, or never again shall I feel a king, or my base rebels understand such that I am.’

It was now Falkland’s turn to sigh ; and sigh, indeed, he did. But he dared not discuss the matter further with the King, whose towering pride, rather than motives of policy, made him thus set and inveterate in the hope of vengeance.

He only indirectly insinuated his opinion by observing, ‘ But at present, sire, the question is rather how *you* may avoid the vengeance of your enemies.’

‘ What mean you, sir ? Of a surety, now, all of my subjects who are not engaged neck-deep on the contrary part, will rally to me when they shall hear of so unparalleled an atrocity devised against my person itself,’ said Charles, as if astonished the information had not struck his minister in this light.

Edward Holte eagerly took the opportunity to declare how much the audacity of the projected treason had disgusted the very chiefs of the revolt in Birmingham. The master armourer, and head of the smiths’ guild in particular ; the young man, Tubal Bromycham, who was appointed its military leader, and who claimed to be the representative of its ancient and unjustly dispossessed lords ; but, above all, he dwelt upon the fact that it was only by the matchless loyalty and devotion to his Majesty’s service of the master armourer’s daughter, Dorothy Firebrace, that he had himself been enabled to effect his escape, and bring the timely warning he hoped he did.

Charles looked greatly pleased at this statement. ‘ Nay, if the women

take to us, their men will soon follow,' he remarked. 'I will make a note of this good wench's name in my tablet, and it shall purchase her and her kindred, if it may be, some exemption from the heavy destruction which must fall anon on the devoted town; for Birmingham is so, both in our thoughts and in our nephew's most inexorable resolve. Our latest posts from him brought word that he purposed a sudden onslaught on the town, and that he would give it up to fire and sword from end to end, as an example to all others in the like rebellious mood.'

'This inhumanity and impolicy have been tried and failed, sire; the town is well prepared and resolute in its defence,' said Edward, secretly moved to indignation with the bloodthirsty announcement. And on the surprised exclamation of the King and his secretary, he related the general facts of the repulse of Prince Rupert from Birmingham, which had come to his knowledge in his imprisonment.

Lord Falkland was specially and very ominously struck with the tidings.

'I like it less than ever, my liege,' he said, 'this Oliver Cromwell fellow seems to have the makings of a great captain in him; and the only way to mar his greatness——'

'Yes, yes, I know what thou would'st say. Still thy never-failing burden to all songs, "Peace, peace!"' interrupted the King.

Edward eagerly put in his word upon this, in behalf of his neighbour town.

He assured Charles, with great warmth and eloquence, that he felt persuaded Birmingham might easily be brought back to its duty and true allegiance by mild treatment, and an assurance of pardon for what might hitherto be done amiss. Violent measures, he urged upon the King, would only throw both leaders and people resolutely on their defence, who were then by no means confirmed in disloyalty, and hesitating in their course. Were Cromwell but once cleared out of the town, he felt certain the sudden explosion his fiery genius had produced would leave no further effects. Perseverance in attack would, on the other hand, absolutely compel the Parliament to interfere in protection, and probably open the eyes of its commanders to the immense advantages of the general situation and country in the approaching struggle.

The amiable Falkland earnestly seconded this appeal. Blood, he said, never cemented any work; it was so slippery a fluid.

'Well, gentlemen,' the King said at last, rather pettishly at the contradiction, 'it will be time enough to speak of mercy to any of my disloyal cities and people when themselves deign to ask it of us.'

'True, sire,' said Edward Holte, feeling the disguised bitterness of the remark, 'and the question is besides, at this moment, rather of the safe disposal of your own royal person. That, methinks, can never be in a crumbling ruin like this castle, even put on the alert as your Majesty's defence now is.'

'Why not, Master Holte?' Charles hastily replied. 'The chief danger in the purposed attack lay in a possible surprise. This (and I thank your zeal, and will to my best of kingly power recompense) is doubtless prevented.'

'The attack by Captain Cromwell and his cavalry, possibly, sire,'

Edward earnestly rejoined. 'But the general design is of such likelihood and policy, that it is reasonable to conclude the Parliament leaders will take the hint, and pour their whole army round you here from Coventry and Northampton, and I see not what means of resistance attend your Majesty against a formal siege by such a host as the Earl of Essex is assembling fast.'

'The only refuge, sire, is evidently flight,' said Lord Falkland, using an indiscreet word; a word which roused all the pride and ireful disdain of the Stuart's character.

'Flight, Lord Falkland! And do you dare to advise your Prince to so mean and cowardly a course as to fly before his rebels? Let them come. Men will then believe in my danger, and in the threatening ruin that awaits all other chiefdom and pre-eminence in my person. I tell you, sirs, all England will rally round the steeps of Nottingham, when it is known the King of England is in hazard of life and royalty within its castle walls.'

Lord Falkland, well acquainted with the obstinacy of the King's character when he once announced a resolution, only ventured now to entreat that at least the Council might be reassembled to hear the tidings, and advise his Majesty upon them.

But Charles was not to be reasoned with in his present mood. 'No, Falkland, no!' he exclaimed; 'I know that it will only be to hear from them again base counsels of submission, and imploring peace at any cost from my insolent Westminster masters. It is much fitter that my soldiers should be called to counsel now with sharpened swords!'

And moved by one of those sudden and violent impulses which he seldom supported in their consequences, Charles strode to the door of the chamber, and opening it, called out at the pitch of his voice, 'Ho! gentlemen of the guard, *à moi, à moi!* (to me, to me).'

The response to this appeal was of a rather startling character. The apartment in which the King had hitherto given peaceful audience to the messenger of warning suddenly became flooded by a throng of half-drunken and excited men, who, pouring in with naked swords in their hands, seemed inclined to make a victim at once of the stranger. One of the foremost, at all events, a man of powerful and rather handsome person, though with a most debauched and ferocious expression of countenance, advanced, staggering, but evidently with overboiling zeal, on Edward Holte. 'Has the rascal attempted some harm to your Majesty? Make mincemeat of him, gentlemen?' this personage roared out, flourishing his sword; and the King himself was obliged to restrain his blood-thirsty violence.

'Retract that expression, Goring, and instantly, I command you?' Charles said, well knowing what the point of honour in such a case would require, even under a drunken mistake, and seizing the ruffianly upraised arm. 'This gentleman, on the contrary, has put himself to great hazard to serve me. It is to communicate his intelligence I have summoned you. A party of Roundhead horse, gentlemen, is riding hitherward to make your King their prisoner. May I trust for my protection to your swords?'

'Against the whole world, sire, an't please your Majesty! Where

are the villains?' yelled the before mentioned valiant personage, flourishing his sword now wildly in the air.

'This is the man,' whispered Falkland to Edward, 'who lost us Portsmouth without a blow; having embezzled the King's money for the defence so utterly, that he had not wherewithal left to buy the garrison a fortnight's salt.'

Edward smiled scornfully.

'The enemies are probably coming pretty fast into the windmill swinging of your sword, now, Lord Goring,' he remarked. 'But, before you destroy them utterly off the face of the earth, I must ask of you truly to withdraw your insulting word, or face one close at hand.'

'I obey the King's orders in all things, sire,' the braggadocio replied, in humbled accents; and Edward, by a contemptuous nod, accepted the apology as sufficient, just as a personage, in the fantastic costume of court fool, who had scudded in with the rest, quietly added, 'Except in keeping of his towns, good coz?'

There was a general peal of laughter, which seemed not to be restrained by the King's evident displeasure.

'But where are these enemies, sire? Gentlemen, let us throw open the gates, and spare them what trouble we can in their approach,' said a splendidly-arrayed young cavalier of those noble guardsmen.

'You are but sixty, my Lord Denbigh, and probably thrice your number to the attack,' rebuked Lord Falkland.

'No matter; we will not count them; and the more they are, shall but the better show the King that men can fight even with what you style *golden swords*, Lord Falkland,' returned the impetuous youth.

The secretary had possibly made some such allusion to the supposed restraining influences of great wealth on valour with relation to the noble guard, who were nearly all of them of extensive possessions, as well as of the highest rank.

'Do not wrangle, gentlemen. Rest satisfied with this, that I shall place the life of your King in your hands, and will not stir from this place for any number of assailants likely to be brought against it,' said Charles; and the announcement was received with an uproar of triumph and joy.

Only the captain of the troop, Lord Bernard Stuart, did not seem so well content; and inquired if they were to take his Majesty's commands direct, or from the Major-General, Sir Jacob Astley, who was expected in every moment from a hawking-party in the fields.

Lord Falkland took the opportunity to renew his entreaty that the Council might be reassembled round his Majesty. But Charles interrupted him with passionate exasperation.

'No, my Lord,' he exclaimed, 'these are the only proper councillors now for an English King! The die is cast: this last immeasurable insult and treason has overflowed the measure of my so far exhaustless endurance. War, nothing but war, henceforth. If I made peace on such terms as the Parliament might accede to me, in my supposed present desperate circumstances, gentlemen,' he continued to the guardsmen, 'I may, indeed, remain the shadow of a king; I may be waited on bareheaded; I may have my hand kissed; the title of Majesty may

be continued to me ; and the King's authority, signed by both Houses, may still be the style of their commands. I may have swords and maces carried before me, and please myself with the sight of a crown and sceptre, though even these twigs would not long flourish when the stock upon which they grew was dead. But as to true and real power, I should remain but the outside, but the picture, but the sign of a king. My towns are taken from me, my ships, my arms, my money ; but there still remain to me a good cause, and the hearts of my loyal subjects, which, with God's blessing, will recover all the rest—among whom I truly hold this gentleman, Master Edward Holte, not among the least. And, now, gentlemen, to your several duties, as I must to mine ; and, my Lord Falkland, see that your friend be well lodged and attended in our own household here. And so, farewell.'

He waved his hand, and bowed with a kingly grace and stateliness to the assemblage, who bent in acknowledgment almost to the ground and all present retired.

Lord Falkland resumed his hold of Edward's arm.

'There's but one hope now of aught reasonable,' he whispered to his friend as they left the presence. 'I will hasten and communicate all to Sir Edward Hyde, whose eloquence sometimes has influence over our master when no man else can more with him than the wind on a frozen sea. But, indeed, if the King continues in his obstinacy, all we can do is to make ready to die loyally by his side.'

CHAPTER XLIX.

GRIMSORWE'S GRAND COUNTER-MOVE.

AFTER the excitement of this scene, Edward felt a very natural return of his fatigue. In fact he almost fell asleep in the midst of an attempt at giving some further explanations to Lord Falkland, who, observing his condition, humanely left him to repose in his own chamber, with the assurance that if the enemy appeared he would immediately call him.

It was late in the evening before Edward awoke, much refreshed, and found Lord Falkland seated at his bedside.

This kind friend had also provided restoratives of a more substantial kind, of which Edward was now well enough inclined to partake ; particularly when he heard that the day had passed off without any alarm, and that the most diligent scouring of the adjoining country and forest had failed to discover an enemy.

He readily accounted for this by stating that his escape was known to Cromwell, who, finding his pursuit fail, would probably despair of success without the advantage of a surprise, and relinquish the enterprise.

Falkland looked grave, and, though evidently unwillingly, did not conceal from his friend that the unpleasant result had followed that a degree of incredulity was thrown on the whole information. The King, especially had relapsed into one of his most rooted prejudices—that his

subjects never would actually dare to raise their hands against their sovereign, when they should be called upon to face him in person. 'Such a divinity doth hedge a king,' he believed with his favourite poet.

One good result had, however, followed the restoration of this self-confidence. The King had listened more temperately to advice, and Sir Edward Hyde had prevailed upon him to consent to hold another council, to consider whether terms of peace should be proposed for the last time. But the virtuous and clear-souled Falkland acknowledged with a sigh that the minister had been obliged to suggest this as a mere trick to gain time. He and the rest of the council, however, wished Edward to attend their sitting, to endeavour once more to bring conviction of the danger of his situation to the King.

After this, the conversation of the two friends became more general.

Falkland was well acquainted with Edward Holte's family affairs and position, and the harsh species of domestic tyranny under which he laboured. Conversation on this point was, however, necessarily constrained; only Edward learned, with little satisfaction, that the Lord Keeper Lyttelton, father of the young lady to whom he had been betrothed from his childhood, without any reference whatever to his own feelings or selection, was with the Court at Nottingham.

This nobleman was no favourite with Falkland or his friend; and, indeed, he shared the general fate of selfish time-servers, and was an object of contempt with both the parties between whom he strove to trim.

He was, however, a lawyer of great abilities and position; but having been raised to his dignity (corresponding to that of Lord Chancellor at the present day) to assist in saving the Earl of Strafford on his impeachment, he had craftily shunned performance of the conditions in a way that rather conduced to the catastrophe of that 'bold, bad' minister. After subsequently wavering and hesitating between the contending parties, the violent proceedings of the Parliament, and his instincts as a lawyer, frightened him from their cause, and he had recently escaped from London with the Great Seal in his possession to secure a welcome with the Court. He had, hitherto, however, received but a very cold one, for Charles cherished a life-long repugnance to all who had been in any way instrumental to the destruction of the most skilful and courageous instrument of his arbitrary designs.

But why Edward Holte least liked this amphibious politician lay in the fact that he was likely to prove one of the main obstacles to the success of his love affair with the armourer's daughter.

This was an unknown circumstance in his friend's history to Falkland, until the warmth of his friend's expressions respecting the young girl in question excited his notice and curiosity. Edward Holte, then, very desirous to secure an ally so near the King, and unaccustomed to keep secrets from his friend, avowed to him his passionate attachment, and wish and purpose to make his brave rescuer his wife.

Lord Falkland received this statement in a manner Edward had calculated upon, from his knowledge of his pure and honourable and right-minded character. He confessed that nothing could be more un-

just than constraint on such a vital point, and highly approved of the intentions avowed by his friend, to observe every species of good faith and honourable dealing towards the woman of his choice. But, although he was himself above the ordinary prejudices of his age, Falkland was quite well aware of them.

‘Marry an artisan’s daughter, a mechanic citizen’s heiress! Prefer to the Lord Keeper’s the daughter of a man who heads a sedition against the King! If we supposed even the impossibility of your father’s consent, my dear Edward, the King would remain rooted to objections! There is no stronger prejudice in his mind, derived from his sky-flying Scottish ancestry, than utter disdain and repugnance to a mingling of gentle blood with what is called that of the commonalty. It is impossible!’

‘But I have told you the Firebraces trace their descent—as clearly as the Stuarts themselves from their royal progenitors—from the prime nobility of France,’ said Edward.

‘Still, nothing can efface the stain of their mechanic occupation in the equally vulgar eyes of kings and populates!’ said Falkland, with a mournful smile, for all philosophy is mournful. ‘But if anything can, dear Edward, it will be the memorable service which conjointly you and this brave Birmingham maiden have rendered to the King.’

This was all the consolation Edward derived in his affairs of the heart from his friend. But in those of the intellect a rich fruitage awaited him in the society and conversation of the accomplished Falkland. A tender-hearted and great-souled man, the famous secretary of Charles I. united the rarest distinctions of humanity. His comprehensive genius took in all that was exalted, refined, and august in the qualities of the mind; his generous and feeling heart all that was kindly, faithful, affectionate, and heroic, in impulse and emotion. Happy, then, was he who died so young, before he had time to experience to the fullest extent how misplaced natures such as his ever, ever are in such a world as ours!

Edward passed a much more restless night than might have been anticipated from his fatigue. But the council was held early on the following day, and Lord Falkland presented himself betimes to be his conductor before it.

The raillery with which he was received in the guard chamber, even more than his friend’s report, opened Edward’s eyes to the fact that his tidings began to be discredited.

The young Earl of Denbigh came yawning up to him, and smilingly reproached him with making him lose his night’s sleep for nothing. ‘Had it been in the expectation of some pretty damsel or dame, now,’ the sprightly cavalier remarked; ‘but, fie upon it, to stand stark in steel on a rampart from sunset to rise, looking out for a foe that never appears!’

Lord Goring, also, mindful of his late rebuke, made his reflections with characteristic swagger and insolence.

‘You must have been very heartily afraid for the King’s safety, sir, so far to outpost pursuit. We hear there are witches in Warwickshire; mayhap you rode hither on a discarded broomstick?’

'Your remarks abound in *salt*; it would be for his Majesty's service to have your stores for a siege, Lord Goring,' interposed Falkland, checking his friend's visibly irritated rejoinder.

Edward's reception by the King and his assembled councillors was equally cold, and apparently incredulous in tone.

The Lord Keeper himself, though destined, as was supposed, to so near an alliance, fought extremely shy of him at first, as of a person under a cloud—a circumstance Edward was not grieved at. But it is astonishing how high men of vulgar natures are to the inferior animals, and how closely they resemble them in most of their procedures; and is it not known how the four-foot sick or wounded are treated by the herd?

These grave personages fell to questioning Edward with great minuteness upon the facts of his information.

Very soon he could plainly perceive that it was considered the right courtly vein to be unable to believe in the possibility of such an atrocity designed against the royal person and majesty as had been declared. The Lord Keeper frequently expressed his trust and conviction that such a height of blasphemy had not been reached even by the worst of the traitors he had left behind him at London. Sir Edward Hyde cross-questioned him with all the dexterity of legal practice, as if he had been a lawyer employed to establish an opposite chain of conclusions.

Especially was Edward annoyed by being called upon to explain exactly how he came in possession of the information he had conveyed.

From a feeling which had certainly in no way been exhibited towards him by his base-born and base-hearted brother, he had hitherto carefully refrained from divulging the share he had taken in the whole transaction. But the object of the councillors, and particularly of the King himself, seemed now to be to ascertain by what means the enemy had become acquainted with his slender provision against attack, and the general carelessness of the garrison of Nottingham.

It was pretty plain that Edward fenced in his replies to these questions; and as he also declined to state by what means he had obtained the disguise in which he now appeared, and had fled from Birmingham, several of the councillors began to evince unmistakable signs of dissatisfaction. Charles himself, indeed, had more than once made the observation that, so far as he was aware, in all Warwickshire only Sir Thomas Holte had been put in possession of these facts, by way of inducing him to hasten his promised levy. But, luckily, when Edward in turn was beginning to lose patience, urgent despatches were stated to arrive from Prince Rupert; and the King at once ordered them to be brought to him at the council-board.

The messenger was accordingly introduced with his letters.

He was announced as Cornet Titus, of the Prince's own regiment, and, on entrance, proved to be a young man of very confident and lively manners, which scarcely even the presence of the King restrained.

Charles was no admirer of this species of individual, and the gravity and austerity of his own demeanour visibly increased when the jaunty officer of dragoons, presenting his documents on both knees, declared himself perfectly able to explain anything that might seem to require

more light, as he was employed by his Highness in their composition as secretary.

This Titus was, in truth, the same who afterwards, having reached the rank of colonel, composed the celebrated Royalist pamphlet, advocating the assassination of Cromwell, entitled, 'Killing no Murder.'

King Charles read the letter at first to himself, the councillors looking on in silence, and immovably, with the exception of the Earl of Southampton, who quietly took the opportunity to pick his teeth, aside, with a straw he found on the floor at his feet.

When the King at last raised his eyes from his perusal and looked at Edward Holte, it was with a very peculiar expression of surprise and blame.

'Methinks a brother's merits in the affair need not have been so carefully concealed,' he then said, in a very displeased tone, 'and even to the hazard of your own story's somewhat discrediting! My lords, my nephew writes to me that he had but just returned to Aston Hall from the observation and pursuit of a large party of rebel horse, secretly assembled in Birmingham; which suddenly quitting the town in our direction, ascertained that surprise was hopeless, from Master Holte's escape, and turned off to join the Earl of Essex, at Northampton. These partisans were first observed by Sir Thomas Holte himself, and a faithful servant of his house; but only explained by the arrival of a gentleman of the Holte family (though but by a left-hand acknowledgment, it seems), who had also been made a prisoner in Birmingham: where, discovering the whole mystery of the iniquity devised against us, he revealed it to his brother—this Master Holte of yours, my Lord Falkland! And rather than that any delay in the warning to us should ensue—knowing himself to be no rider to compare with his well-bred brother (being but of the legal profession, which rather affects coaches and slow Flanders mares, my Lord Keeper!)—and having his passport to leave the place, he most loyally and generously changed clothes, and gave it, to forward the necessary diligence. Which flight of Master Holte being then by him purposely declared and confessed, when it could run no risk of being stayed, has happily turned aside the whole stream of mischief. But I say again, Master Holte, you should not have been so eager to engross the whole merit of the service to yourself and I know not what traitor armourer's daughter of Birmingham, who does not appear, from anything written here, to have had any real share in the transaction.'

It must be imagined, not described, with what emotion Edward Holte listened to this statement.

He saw at once into what a trap he had fallen by his own generous forbearance. Conviction appeared in the countenances of all who heard.

The Lord Keeper himself clenched the fact by remarking, 'Ay, ay, there was never any great love lost between Sir Thomas's lawful heir and his natural imp!'

Edward felt that all he could say in explanation would now come too late: that the most conspicuous portion of the whole merit had been seized to himself by Grimsorwe's unparalleled daring and dexterity.

Moreover, when he did begin to speak in some declaration of the truth, the King imperiously interrupted him.

'It matters not now, sir, we have other matters to attend to,' Charles said. 'The Prince mentions that this officer will expound to us the great conveniences and uses of Birmingham and its vicinity for all warlike business, and his Highness's consequent desire that we will incontinently forward to him some pieces of artillery, and what infantry can be spared, to force an entry into the town, and reduce it to a good subjection.'

Cornet Titus began a very fluent and lengthened military exposition upon this; but as the King listened to it with evident attention and interest, no one ventured to interrupt. And it appeared to carry conviction to the royal mind; for at the first pause in the overflow Charles turned to Lord Falkland, and desired him to write at once to York to expedite the sending of two large *culverins* (so 18-pounder cannons were then styled) with a competent guard of infantry, to his Highness the Prince, at Aston Hall, in Warwickshire, to reduce the revolted town of Birmingham.

Edward, however, could no longer submit in silence to this.

'Your Majesty will but thereby,' he exclaimed, 'make irreconcilable enemies of a people who, by gentle means, may, I am sure, be easily reclaimed to your obedience!'

'And you have *fair* intelligence in the town, sir, or you would not have taken so much pains to persuade us that the daughter of the principal leader in the sedition, this Master-Armourer Firebrace, is a secret loyalist and friend of our authority,' said Charles, with a sneer, though it was a form of rebuke he was mostly too proud to use to his inferiors.

The Lord Keeper, who was sitting mopingly with his hands muffled in his crimson robes, now looked up, stared, and frowned.

Edward coloured, and felt it inexpedient to hazard any further reply.

Lord Falkland, however, true to his ever-urged policy of conciliation, spoke up alone among the councillors on behalf of Edward's proposition. 'Let, at least, gentle means first be tried!' he earnestly entreated.

Sir Edward Hyde and the Earl of Southampton also joined in an opinion to this effect. Upon all which a subterfuge extremely agreeable to King Charles's genius seemed to occur to him.

'Why, sirs,' he said, 'make what diligence we may, some considerable interval must elapse before the guns can be carried from York, properly guarded, to where they are asked for. And so let Master Holte make all use of his secret agencies and influence in Birmingham, to bring the people back to their duty in the meantime. On that condition I do offer them full pardon and remission of their offences hitherto. But if he fails, the guns will not arrive amiss, methinks; and for our more immediate protection I will have the Prince recall his cavalry from the west, and throw it over the country between us and Aston Hall, where, as he writes, he purposes for a time to fix the headquarters of his command. And now, in what concerns the article of this message, you would have me send to London yet again, sirs,' the King went on to say, as if entirely dismissing the former subjects. 'I

do yield, in so far as I think it may tend to daze the Parliament with hopes of my submission, and put some slacking on their efforts till I can think myself safer, and see myself more partisan than I am at present in my quarters here. But let it be well known to all ye who call yourselves my friends,' he continued, glancing at Edward, 'that there is nothing really meant by this towards a peace; which can never be till the sword has shown who has to dictate the terms. I hope to see you as a soldier next, Master Holte; and meanwhile inform your father's *other son* that I will find some means also to repay him his faithfulness and hazard in our service ere long.'

With these words it was evident the King dismissed Edward from his presence; and, in fact, all but the Councillors of State seemed to feel their own dispensed with, and retired.

CHAPTER L.

EDWARD'S RETURN TO ASTON HALL.

DISGUSTED to the last degree with what had occurred to him in this memorable interview, Edward speedily shook off the company Cornet Titus seemed willing to confer upon him, and made for the solitude he hoped to find in Falkland's apartment. Nor was he at all turned from this object or flattered by the cornet's polite observation—'I should have known you at the bottom of a coal-pit, sir, from your resemblance to your beautiful sister at Aston Hall; who, I can assure you, the Prince Palatine himself declares the handsomest young lady he has set eyes upon in England as yet!'

Edward scarcely responded to the compliment, or perhaps noticed it; but if he did at all it rather added to the vexation he experienced at finding himself so wonderfully defeated and circumvented in all his most reasonable expectations by the infernal craft and artifice of his detestable and detested relative.

A kind of agony of powerless indignation and astonishment came over Edward's whole mind and heart when once he found himself alone, and free to pursue the windings of uncomfortable thought and apprehension which now appeared to his reflections.

The traitor who had usurped so unaccountably the superior merit in the foiling of his own wicked stratagems, of what more in the way of treachery and contrivance was he not capable?

Never before had Edward Holte dreaded his brother. He had long suspected his hidden rancour against himself personally; had despised his mean and calculating nature, and wondered at the baseness of artifice and adulation he exhibited in endeavouring to advance himself, as the lion's cub might wonder at the underground operations of a mole, whose progress is marked by the dirt it heaves. Now he regarded him with a mixture of fear in his horror and contempt, which the same noble animal might entertain for the insidious snake.

Then what would Dorothy Firebrace think of the great failure in all their plans, caused by his own senseless forbearance?

If the wicked sometimes feel remorse for their ill deeds, it is never probably so acute as that white species of the same passion, when a good and generous nature finds its displays of those qualities turned against itself.

Punishment seems a natural recompense for guilt, and is accepted as such by evil-doers, mostly with a kind of consolation in the assurance that they are reaping as they have sown. But to be afflicted for our very virtues, to sow good wheat grains and only hemlock to spring, seems unnatural and portentous even to those who have had the longest experience of life and the ways of men.

This feeling, that he had done wrong in sparing the villain whom he felt he should have maimed for mischief by revealing his noxious qualities, tormented Edward long. In vain he recalled to mind Dorothy's exhortations to him not to forget that the wretch was his brother. The terror—we can call it by no other name—inspired by moral depravity so matched by cunning and audacity, deepened every moment in his breast when he considered who, even more than himself, had provoked the hatred and vengeance of so relentless a foe.

In the consternation of this idea his fancy presented him a most alarming array of possible dangers awaiting the object of his youthful but devoted love. It seemed to Edward Holte as if his own presence and unslumbering watchfulness could scarcely suffice to guard off the perils menacing his betrothed from his unnatural brother's resentment and craft. Moreover, he remembered the circumstances under which he had left her in Birmingham; and, powerful as her friends were there, who could say what might be the consequences in the topsy-turvy state of things in the town? True, Cromwell, whose vengeance might have been dreaded, was said to have withdrawn himself; but other and perhaps worse dangers might be apprehended from the excited passions of the populace, which there were so many evil agencies to set in action.

Edward determined to lose not a moment in returning to face his unnatural enemy at Aston Hall, and take upon himself thence the necessary guardianship of his soul's beloved.

Lord Falkland found him in this resolution, which, indeed, he did not oppose. He plainly intimated, in fact, that the great service he had performed was by no means properly appreciated by the King. His Majesty openly expressed an opinion that there was a singular want of straightforwardness and whole-heartedness in Master Holte's proceedings. He remarked suspiciously on the evident good-will and intelligence that existed between the heir of Aston and the revolted town; and Lord Falkland himself confessed he could not quite understand some points in his friend's conduct and explanations as regarded his brother.

Edward, upon this, burst into a full declaration, to this true and faithful friend, of the real circumstances of the case; but although Falkland personally was convinced and satisfied, however much amazed with the revelation, greatly to Edward's chagrin, he declared he thought it no longer feasible to bring the King to a true comprehension of the state of the affair.

'All this will seem to his Majesty mere after-thought and contrivance. I say it in sadness and in shame, but the King is so accustomed to tortuous inventions and subterfuge to remedy his own mistakes and faults, that he would likely believe much worse of you than now, should you attempt to force a knowledge of the truth upon him,' Lord Falkland observed. 'He will deem that, to secure the rewards and honour due to your courageous interposition, you are no longer content with an unhandsome suppression of your brother's share in the adventure, but aim at his removal from your path by unfounded calumnies and imputations of treason. But such a villain will be sure, in the long-run, to reveal himself unmistakably. Meanwhile, were I you, dearest friend, I would indeed lose no time in returning to endeavour to disabuse your father of his confidence in this traitor, and protect your friends from his further ill designs; and if by any possibility you can, as you persuade yourself, recall Birmingham to the King's allegiance, it is impossible to do his cause and your own a greater service. Look, I have taken care to urge the point so earnestly upon the King, that I have procured you a full and gracious pardon for all of the town who submit to the King's mercy, ere force is applied. It lacks nothing but the great seal of England to it, which my Lord Keeper promises to bring from his lodgings hither and apply; and his Majesty promises, moreover, to give you a letter in his own hand to the Prince Palatine, commanding him to abstain from all attack on Birmingham, or infliction of punishment in life or goods, so long as you can give assurance or hope of the townsmen's return to their allegiance. But his Majesty himself will see you, and give you your instructions, or ere you depart.'

Edward expressed his earnest wish that no delay that could be spared him should be made, and Lord Falkland promised he would expedite the business as speedily as possible. He would take a proper time, he added, to put what respected Grimsorwe in its true light before the King, when other circumstances would probably have occurred to strengthen such evidence as could now be adduced.

In the midst of this conversation the Lord Keeper entered, with a small crimson velvet box in his hand, surmounted by a crown; considerably to the increase of Edward's annoyance, who for private reasons of his own was not much desirous of the company.

He apologised to the Lord Keeper for the trouble he was giving him; but the latter replied emphatically that he would rather trust the heart out of his breast, in another man's keeping, than the great seal of England out of his own.

'And if you only knew, good son, the trouble and danger I have incurred to escape with it out of the clutches of the Parliament men in London, you would know what to think of the matter. And I do expect daily to hear they have declared me a traitor for my loyalty; but better so, at a distance, than clapped up in a dungeon of the Tower with my Lord of Canterbury, or some other faithful servant of the King's,' the Lord Keeper feelingly remarked; and he entered into a long narrative of the circumstances of his flight from London, and the infinite difficulties and dangers attending the enterprise.

'My house was watched night and day on the secret, by Master Pym's

orders, and well I knew it was so, good cousin,' he went on to say; 'and, good Lord! imagine what my condition grew to be at last as they brought me treason after treason to stamp and certify with the magic in this little box. But the matter of raising the militia against the King did quite break me down in my compliances; it was such open and manifest treason. Yet was I forced to put the seal to this also, and the Earl of Essex's commission, merely to shut their eyes to my true intentions. Yet had it not been for Sergeant Maynard's assistance, I should never have known how to compass it; but he dressed up a figure in my wig and robes, that sat for a day hearing causes in Westminster Hall, while I took boat at the stairs, garbed like some mean citizen, and so on board a Newcastle collier, that conveyed me safe and sound, but with incredible anguishes of mind and dismays of pursuit, with the precious thing in my possession, to the garrison, and noble marquis of that place, holding it for the King.'

It thence appeared that the Lord Keeper, not having been lately in Warwickshire, had a thousand questions to ask of Edward Holte concerning the state of things there; particularly how all was at Hagley, his family seat, where his wife and daughter now resided.

Edward was a good deal embarrassed with these questions, having been, in truth, very remiss in his attentions to his betrothed bride for a considerable time before even he made the acquaintance of Dorothy Firebrace—facts which the Lord Keeper himself speedily discerned, and Edward, perhaps, took no great trouble to conceal. But his lordship was too politic to make any direct observation on the circumstance; only when he affixed the seal to the pardon offered to Birmingham, he expressed a civil hope that he should soon see his friend Sir Thomas Holte again, and make use of the first restoration of tranquillity to complete the happy union arranged between the families.

'Amen' certainly stuck in Edward's throat to this; but fortunately Lord Falkland, who had been for some time absent, now re-entered the room.

This zealous friend brought good news for Edward. The King had consented to expedite him his letter, and permit him to kiss hands on his departure, immediately after he had dined. 'And his Majesty makes no long meals now,' said Falkland, 'and there is no need of a great flourish of trumpets to signify the changes of the courses; for indeed, until the plate came to hand from Oxford, never was poor prince so moneyless for his occasions as ours, who but awhile ago thought little of expending a couple of thousand pounds on a single night's masque, or other stage divertisement at court.'

Edward, with a blush, declared that at all events his father had money at command, which he would doubtless be proud to contribute to his Majesty's necessities; and a page summoning them at this moment to what was emphatically styled 'the presence,' he was very glad to leave my Lord Keeper's scrutiny and follow thither.

He found the King in rather a better humour than he had left him in the morning—one that might be called severely gracious—and surrounded by nearly all the principal persons of his little court.

It was plain Charles thought to make what has been styled in modern

times 'political capital' out of Cromwell's foiled audacity. Thanking Edward coldly for his display of zeal, he expressed a hope that his father, and other loyal gentlemen of the county, would now perceive the necessity of immediately fulfilling the promises they had made to him.

Edward respectfully renewed his statement that nothing but arms were wanting for his father's tenantry to form an excellent troop of horse ; to which Charles drily replied that if he succeeded, as he announced he hoped, in bringing back the revolted town of Birmingham to its allegiance, the best possible sign of submission would be for the smiths of that place to furnish the arms they were so well able. 'And you give us to understand,' the King added, with an austere smile, 'that Venus is willing to use her influence with her husband, Vulcan, in the sooty town, to forward your designs in our favour.'

'No such goddess, sire,' returned Edward, indignantly colouring, observing the titter and buzz that ran round among the assembled courtiers, 'but rather the chastest and noblest of them all, witty Minerva, mistress of all the arts ! The loyal daughter of the master-armourer of Birmingham, sire, is a young girl of spotless honour and repute ; and he who but smiles otherwise, saving your sole Majesty, must answer to me for the gibe with his sword.'

'Let us not further risk to provoke this ireful young gentleman,' said Charles, hastily, and glancing rebukingly round his circle. 'Go, and speed with these blacksmiths and their goddess daughters in any manner you deem best—only *speed*. Here is a letter to the Prince our nephew, on whose delivery there shall be peace awhile between his swordsmen and Birmingham, if they also will have it so. Promise what else you will beside ; the keeping will be with us. Tell the Prince I will send further verbal explanations by Cornet Titus. And now a good farewell to you ; and when you next kneel to us, we trust it shall be to ask some suitable recompense for yet greater service than, we would all men note, we hold to have received already at your hands.'

Edward thankfully received the document, knelt and kissed the King's hand, and retired ; but, greatly to his concern, Lord Falkland, who followed him out, advised him to lose no time in returning to Aston, on a notion he seemed to have taken that some double policy was at work. 'It is the King's way but too much,' he said, sadly ; 'and these verbal explanations to be sent by Cornet Titus may very possibly be of a kind to thwart the whole meaning of the written word. To horse at once, my dear Edward ; and, besides, I see you are too honest and plain-spoken for a court as yet. Would to God that I had ever known so also of myself ! But it is too late now ; and if this unhappy king is to be saved at all it can only now be by honest counsels, which least of all he heeds, but which ever shall be mine.'

This suggestion was scarcely needed to hasten Edward's departure ; but he determined not to delay another hour in Nottingham, and begging Falkland to make his excuses in the hurry of his business to the Lord Keeper, the two friends embraced and parted.

CHAPTER LI.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

EDWARD HOLTE's horse had not yet recovered sufficiently its express gallop of fifty miles from Birmingham to allow him to return at a similarly rapid pace. He was obliged to rest at night at Leicester on the way ; but he met with no other obstacle, nor anything indeed to call for particular remark, until he arrived, about an hour before noonday, in Aston Park. He was then making the best of his way on his jaded beast to the mansion, when he came upon an unexpected movement.

He was about the middle of the great avenue, reflecting deeply on the best means to forward the objects he had in view, when he perceived a confused crowd of people suddenly swarming into it at the extremity.

For the most part these were on foot ; and Edward, who was of course familiar with his father's servants and neighbours, easily discerned that the throng was chiefly made up of the former, and a number of the villagers of Aston.

Men, women, and children were intermingled ; many of them with reaping-hooks in their hands, as if suddenly called from harvest labours in the field by some unusual cause of excitement. He recognised Robert Falconer in particular, and the gravedigger of Aston, who united to that office the seemingly very dissimilar one of a fiddler. Almost idiotic with age as he was, moreover, he seemed to preserve a good mechanical skill on his instrument, and was now scrubbing away at a lively sort of jig, or march, which evidently contributed very much to the cheerful movement of the company.

They came on at a rattling pace—talking, laughing, shouting—sometimes running indeed, to keep along with what was clearly a central figure in the movement, and which being on horseback made the exertion occasionally necessary. And besides, the poor animal, alarmed with the hubbub around it—perhaps struck or goaded on the sly behind, or hit by some malicious stone from a distance—frequently plunged, or kicked out, or darted headlong forward—varieties that greatly pleased the rabble, who raised the most uproarious shouts and laughter, and urged each other on to repeat the diverting exhibition ; the chief part of the fun, it must be remembered, consisting in the fact that there was a human creature fastened on the horse by cords, through his naked feet, beneath its belly, but a human creature stigmatised by wearing a lofty paper foolscap, with the words ‘traitor and spy’ daubed in the largest red ochre letters on his bare back and breast, like a branded sheep.

If any doubt of the specific meaning of what was occurring could remain, the countenance, bloodless with terror, the shrieks and lamentable cries of the victim, and a thick rope round his neck, made things pretty plain.

One end of this rope was held by a pedestrian, of a tall, gaunt, rigid figure, dressed in a black leather suit, with a singularly large pair of scissors stuck in his girdle, and a sword of unusual and portentous length slung over his left shoulder. It was too long to be carried in the usual

way at the belt. This was a man of a foreign appearance, with a long beard, but hair cut almost close to a strongly-developed, hard-boned narrow, almost pointed cranium; a man of a physiognomy unalterably sedate and unmoved, who seemed to take the whole affair with the greatest imaginable nonchalance, holding his head stiff and upright without regarding either to the right or left, and evidently equally insensible to the outcries of the victim and the disorderly movement of the village rout.

What was rather singular about this group was the fact that a personage who seemed an officer of rank, by his ornamented armour and waving plume, rode on the other side, also holding a rope, much thicker and stronger, and which was passed round the neck of the horse.

This rider appeared to be greatly enjoying the whole affair, encouraging the mob in their demonstrations by gestures, words, and applauding bursts of laughter, and frequently making his own mount execute various fantastic gambades and caracoles that added to the excitement and restlessness of the victim. He was a man of gigantic figure, and with big, coarse, flat face, not deficient, nevertheless, in humour and vivacity of expression.

Edward was surprised and alarmed at what he saw. But it was not until he was close upon the whole party, which he pressed forward to meet, that he recognised in the horror-stricken wretch tied on the horse the tinker-boy whom he had seen so busy aiding in pulling down the old cross in Birmingham market-place on the unlucky day of his own last visit there.

Doubtless the poor lad was now undergoing in his proper person the horrors and tribulation he at a later period depicted in his Pilgrim passage through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. A more dreadful aspect of despair and frantic fear Edward had never beheld. It awakened immediate compassion in his breast, though it seemed only to excite derision and amusement in all but the impassive military executioner besides. Such Edward now supposed the tall man, with the huge sword and scissiors, in the black leather garb, to be.

As a foreigner, and one well accustomed to such scenes by his position in the camps of the ruthless leaders of the continental warfare of the times, this man's insensibility was perhaps natural enough. But Edward could scarcely account for the ferocious enjoyment in the other accompanier's manner, until he heard him speak. His accent then betokened him to be one of a class of assistants in the bloody work known to be at hand, whom Charles had most unadvisedly permitted to join his standards—a leader perhaps in the then recent horrible insurrection and massacres in Ireland, when the Celtic portion of the population and their chiefs had risen and nearly extirpated the English name from the island; but doubtless, by his title and foreign uniform of black and yellow, one of those exiled soldiers of fortune of the Irish nation who had previously earned distinction in foreign warfare. He was called Count O'Taaffe, and was Prince Rupert's favourite companion, being in truth as jolly and light-hearted a professional murderer (a mercenary soldier is nothing else) as ever carved his bread with his sword. A most gallant and devoted admirer of the fair sex also, though he had rather

a rough way of showing it at times when he played a part in the storming of a town, or was quartered at discretion in an enemy's country.

'In the King's name, what is all this a-doing here?' said Edward, confronting the uproarious group in a manner that brought the whole to a halt, as he directly crossed the advance of the intended sacrifice.

He was immediately recognised by the village people, most of whom took off their caps and hats, exclaiming, 'His honour, Master Edward!' while the culprit uttered a series of hysterical shrieks and exclamations that he was innocent, and that they were going to murder him, and implored mercy in such heart-rending accents that Count O'Taafé put his hand over his mouth, yelling, 'It isn't hanging you we are, sure, but a sow and a whole farrow of squeakers we are ringing in the nose. Will ye never cease the bothering noise of you, now, until we can hear ourselves speak, and know what we are about? Monsieur, I salute you,' he continued, raising his hat in a courtly and polished manner to Edward; 'but as you are a civilian, whatever your name or rank hereabouts, you must be aware you have nothing to do with an execution of the provost-marshal's justice on a traitor and spy against the King.'

'I am none, I am none! I knew not where I was going when I galloped upon the barn where the soldiers slept! I was flying for my life from a witch!' shrieked the affrighted lad.

'Well, my dear, you have run into the right sort of hands to take care of it. I promise ye, ye'll have very little further trouble with your life now,' replied the facetious count.

'We are going, sir,' he continued, explanatorily to Edward, 'to make an example of this young fellow, for the amusement and entertainment of his fellow-traitors behind their barricades, in Birmingham town hereby, by hanging him, and his rebel hack of a horse too, under him, on the tallest gibbet we can find wood for near the place.'

'To hang the lad—and his horse! What strange madness of cruelty is this?' exclaimed Edward.

The count had not failed to observe that his challenger was a person of position and authority. Probably, indeed, he recognised him, as Cornet Titus had, by his resemblance to his sister. He continued, therefore, to answer with an appearance of deference: 'Such are the Prince's orders, sir; they are known to be equally traitors, man and beast, for the one was bestriding the other as guides to the unspeakable rebels who lately purposed to surprise his Majesty's own most sacred person at Nottingham. Sir Thomas Holte himself witnessed the fact, who saw him playing the link-boy at their head.'

'Oh, the Lord preserve me! the Lord preserve me! What shall I do? The Parliament men threatened to hang me unless I did so; but I meant to guide them all awry, and leave them in some marsh or desert place,' shrieked the affrighted lad.

'Heed him not, sir; he set them right when an old woman would have misdirected them, of whom they made question. He has deserved the death; the Prince hath condemned him to it at the drumhead, after hearing all he couldn't utter in his defence, for the speech left him with fear. Only the trifle remains now of seeing the sentence carried out.'

Bunyan again renewed his cries of despair and supplication so vociferously that Edward could hardly make his own voice heard.

'Your pardon, sir,' he then observed to the officer, 'but I bear the King's express commands that no man shall be injured in life or limb, for any of these recent occurrences, unless by his direct commands.'

'Well but, anyhow, you don't call this spalpeen of a lad a *man*?' returned O'Taafe, with a great laugh at his own wit. 'And besides, the Prince's commission from his Majesty will bear him out in any manner of way whatever towards the suppression of this most horrible and unnatural rebellion. Robbery, murder, rape, fire-raising, all comes within our scope, and we mean to exercise our privileges, I can tell you, and like true soldiers and subjects of the King.'

'There is no commission can override this,' said Edward, producing the precious document, endorsed CHARLES R.

O'Taafe glanced at it rather surprised, but said carelessly, 'Oh, we gentlemen of Ireland have learned to go more by his Majesty's *maning* than his words. His Highness, I am sure, will not allow of any interference. Provost-Marshal Storcks, on!'

'Do you then refuse obedience to the King's express commands?' inquired Edward, with indignant astonishment. 'Where is the Prince? he will soon convince you better of your duty.'

'The Prince is close at hand, at the head-quarters of his troops, parading them before the Hall,' replied O'Taafe, looking rather embarrassed. Then, as if he suddenly espied a way out of his perplexity, he continued, 'But come this way, sir; I will soon show you that it is your duty to spare the Prince any trouble in the matter.'

'Don't let them kill me, sir; oh, don't let them kill me, and I will die for you most willingly myself!' shrieked Bunyan, wringing his hands.

'That's their treason to the very marrow. They will do the same thing to please themselves; but nothing to do the King a service!' said O'Taafe, good-humouredly; while Edward, much against his will, walked his horse aside with him to ascertain what was meant. The ghastly, yearning expression of the tinker-boy's countenance painfully irked after him in the movement.

'Well, sir?' he said, when they—the count and himself—had reached the shadow of some lofty sycamores, at a distance from the crowd.

'This is the case then, Monsieur,' said the count, evidently convinced that he had only to explain things to remove the obstacle. 'Nobody of course cares a snap of a pistol about this boy's haltering; but now the Parliament soldiers have gone from the town we are in hopes the Birmingham men will be so provoked to see a comrade swinging—nay, and his horse at his heels for a makeweight—they will make a sally, and so open a way for our cavalry to enter. The Prince and his troopers intend to be in ambuscade behind the woods here until we can see some signs of such a good result, when they will pour on to the assault; and everybody says it is a town of a rich citizenship, and with plenty of pretty girls in, besides, to reward the soldier for his trouble in cutting throats.'

'For this reason, most of all, I will suffer no further steps in so blood-

thirsty and mischievous a plan,' exclaimed Edward, scarcely able to refrain from some more distinct mark of indignation. 'These country people will support their master's son; and the Prince himself, when he shall know the truth, will doubtless lend a ready obedience to the King's commands. Robin Falconer, turn that nag's head there, and follow me home to Aston Hall with the prisoner.'

Robin, whose kindly nature had not hitherto gone very heartily with the work, stepped cheerfully forward and plucked the rope from the hands of the German provost-marshal. The latter stared and looked at O'Taafe, who muttered something to himself. But on reflection, perceiving the preponderance of force was at present with his opponent, he observed, 'Let us know the Prince's own will in the matter, then,' and added some words in a hoarse guttural to the official, which he seemed to understand also in the sense of not offering any resistance. Robin had meanwhile turned the tinker's horse, and in a few moments the whole procession was retracing its steps to Aston Hall.

When this emerged from the green shadows of the long avenue before Aston Hall, Edward riding behind, to see that no trick was played, he perceived rather a showy spectacle.

A solid squadron of horse, glittering in armour, was drawn up in the great gravelled court-yard before the mansion, with its principal officers assembled, but dismounted, at the porch. Two personages, whom Edward recognised as his father and mother in their stateliest costumes, stood there in conversation with some of these; while considerably at a distance, as if engaged in inspecting the elaborate iron-work of the gate leading into the gardens on the right, were his sister and a tall, powerful, rough-looking figure of a young man in armour, with a shaggy sort of a pelisse on his shoulders that looked like a bear-skin. This personage was leaning on his sheathed sword, occasionally using it to point out some feature in the design of the iron-work that appeared to strike him. But it occurred to Edward, painfully and at once, that his gaze was chiefly fixed upon the beautiful girl beside him, and with an intensity of admiration which had in it a good deal more of the trooper's boldness and licence than of the prince and gentleman's respect. And yet this he felt instinctively must be the Prince Palatine himself; and, without delaying to approach to the house, he turned thitherward, and the whole *cortège* with him.

Rupert's falcon-glance was instantly caught by the arrival; but he was plainly greatly surprised and confounded by what he beheld.

'God's life, what's this? They cannot have passed the young cockatrice yet? no, they are bringing him back! What can be the meaning of it all? What stranger is this heading the rabble? Do not disturb yourself, mademoiselle, I will soon learn,' he said, in his rough impatient way, stepping from the young lady's side.

But she followed. 'It is my brother, Edward Holte, may it please your Highness,' she said, blushing deeply, with some strange secret consciousness, quite uncaused by anything apparent.

'Your brother! But nobody's brother under God's living sun has any right to interfere between my orders and their execution—the King alone. Well, gentlemen, what means all this we see?' the Prince

inquired, in haughty and imperious tones, and stepping to meet Edward with so long and sudden a stride that the latter came against him with a degree of shock, as he alighted, out of respect, before he answered.

Edward apologised ; but the Prince sternly interrupted him.

'A woman could not have struck lighter, sir ; you are no rock at your breast ; you have not bulged me !' he said. 'But again, Count O'Taafe, why have you and these people come back with my errand unperformed ?'

'I have interposed, sir, by the King's Majesty's warrant, who has empowered me to grant every species of pardon and oblivion regarding these late transactions, unless the people of Birmingham persist in their sedition,' replied Edward, with the gentle firmness which was a part of his character, but less to be overcome than the noisiest opposition of others.

Rupert stared grimly at him. 'The King is always meddling and marring in this strange way. But I do marvel to hear you have so interposed, if, as I take it, you are the gentleman—son of my most worthy host here—who have been the happy agent to do his Majesty a great service, with the loyal and devoted aid of Master Richard Grimsorwe !' said the Prince. Nevertheless, he continued in an angry, almost an insulting tone :

'But I have been warned of your weaker leanings and inclinations in the town ; and give me leave to tell you, Master Holte, my commission authorises me to receive no commands or instructions but directly from the King in person. So I shall make bold to proceed with his rebels in my own way, till I hear from him by his own lips or hand to the contrary.'

'This letter is every word and line, sir, from his Majesty's own pen,' replied Edward, producing a document which he handed over to the Prince.

He read it with visible impatience and disdain, occasionally uttering a species of wild impatient snort, and tossing his head disdainfully, like an unbroken steed that first feels the snaffle.

'It is most strange, but true ; but if my uncle means to thwart the best intentioned actions for his service thus, all is vain !' he exclaimed, and gnawed his nether lip for a moment's pause.

'You have a power granted you, it is true, Master Holte,' he then continued ; 'yet I do hope that you are not under so strong a delusion and enticement in that traitorous town as hath been reported to me, that you will not rather aid me to bring it to just punishment and submission, than go about to use the restraints unwittingly put by his Majesty on his officers in your rescript here. The opportunity may not easily return.'

'I know not what has been represented to your Highness of my motives or inducements,' replied Edward, coldly ; 'but I purpose to exercise the powers confided to me, under the Great Seal of England itself, to endeavour to conclude some happy peace and reconciliation with my father's neighbours here of Birmingham. And, to begin, I do most peremptorily call upon your Highness and your officers to refrain from all further molestation of this poor lad, who, partly to my own

knowledge, was an impressed and unwilling agent in Captain Cromwell's late design.

'I was, I was, dear sirs,' gasped Bunyan, crying and sobbing bitterly.

'The boy's life is nothing to me, except for the service twisting his neck might have proved. Do with him what you will; I must await the explanations promised me from Nottingham. Mademoiselle, let us resume our inspection of the garden gate. 'Twas a rare artist, rather than smith, who has so devised it, as we see,' said Rupert, disdainfully turning away.

Rough and imperious soldier as he was, he had still something of a German's taste and sensibility in art. At a later period he was said to cultivate that of engraving, and even to be the inventor of mezzotint, from observing the effects produced in light and shade by a soldier scraping the rust off his musket-barrel in parts.

'Release the boy,' said Edward; and Robin Falconer, drawing his hunting-knife, made short work with the thongs at Bunyan's feet.

'Come, then, now,' said Count O'Taafe, during this operation, 'we won't have our morning's work altogether for nothing; and the next best thing we can do to hanging this young sniveller in his Majesty's service will be to make a dragoon of him. He sits a horse as if he was born on the back. My good boy, will you put on breast and back-plates, and fight the King's enemies, instead of mending their old kettles?'

'Only release me, sir, I will do anything and everything your honours are pleased to command!' exclaimed the bewildered tinker lad.

'It's a bargain, then, though I have not one of the King's shillings by me at the moment for earnest. Give him Randal Forster's suit—who had his neck broken slipping from the ditches before the town the other day—and swear him in, Provost Storck's,' said O'Taafe.

Thus it happened that John Bunyan shared for a season in the violence and profanities which speedily became rife in the camps of Charles I., and laid up good portion of that life-long enduring sense of remorse and guilt which appears in every line of his lowly but immortal work, but was possibly rather due to the delicacy of his awakened conscience and feelings afterwards than to any real occasion for so much spiritual anguish and doubt.

Edward himself thought this the best possible conclusion of the affair; and, without heeding the somewhat offensive and derisive manner of the Prince, he raised his hat as he retired with his sister, and quietly watched the operation of loosening the unlucky tinker boy.

When this was effected, Bunyan made an attempt to rush to him, and throw himself at his benefactor's feet in thanks. But the poor lad's limbs were so paralysed with his long and cruel shackling that he fell, after staggering a little, to the ground, to the great amusement of O'Taafe and some of the other officers, who had now gathered near.

Edward Holte, on the contrary, humanely assisted him to rise, and, as he did so, suddenly discerned a too well-known figure hanging over the balustrade of the central tower of Aston Hall, and gazing earnestly towards the spectacle, as if endeavouring to discern its meaning.

The sight reminded Edward, and bidding the boy be of good cheer,

and dispose of himself as he thought proper, he rid him of his effusions of gratitude, and hastened forward to greet Sir Thomas and Lady Holte.

Almost at the same moment the Prince rejoined Arabella Holte, and her brother would have been little gratified if he could have heard his words on doing so. 'It is your brother, mademoiselle, and therefore I allow him his way! I shall soon have other instructions, I nothing doubt, from his Majesty, and meanwhile what does one rascal life matter the more or the less—or anything in such society as I now enjoy?'

CHAPTER LII.

THE BROTHERS.

EDWARD made no further delay in approaching his parents, who he now found discerned him, and was speedily locked in his mother's arms. Sir Thomas himself made way to allow the meeting between the mother and her child; and Rupert's officers, who were mostly aware of the circumstances of the case, decently turned their heads away, or strolled off from the scene of overpowering emotion that ensued between the poor broken-spirited lady and her restored only son.

'Oh, my child! my dearest Edward! to see you again after you have escaped from those barbarous rebels!' exclaimed Lady Holte. 'What I have suffered in terror and apprehension for your sake! My travail when I bore you, my Edward, was less!'

'Dear mother, I was never in so much danger as you suppose from our neighbours of Birmingham! Many of them rather remembered how neighbourly we had always been with them until these unhappy times,' said Edward.

'The *fair ones* especially! Dear brother—dear Master Holte I should say—most welcome home! I trust the King is content with all our zeals in his service; but, out and alas! what have you done with my pleading robes? A poor bachelor of laws like me cannot replace them,' exclaimed a hateful voice at this moment, and Richard Grimsorwe emerged from the porch of Aston Hall, and threw his arms—yes, actually threw his arms—round the unwilling, flesh-creeping frame of Edward Holte—in fond, fraternal greeting home!

Edward, abhorring what had enveloped such a traitor, had exchanged Grimsorwe's lawyer robe for a very plain cloak in Leicester. This was the cause of his impudent query and exclamation, which, however, was not ill-contrived to break the impetus of the reply he might expect.

But it was neither a place nor a time to enter discussions of a nature so involved and personal as Edward Holte felt those must be between his brother and himself. Rupert's officers were now again gathered around, and the Prince himself was seen advancing with Arabella towards the porch, at the young lady's own suggestion, who herself, perhaps, began to discover too trooper-like a warmth and zeal in the Prince's professions of admiration.

'I will explain what I have done with your dress by-and-by, Richard,'

said Edward, releasing himself nevertheless urgently enough from the embrace ; 'at present I am very weary with nigh three days on horse-back, circumventing the basest imaginable plans of traitors and deceivers. Let me, if it please you, enter my father's house again, and rest awhile.'

'Of all loves, yea—pray you, sir, make none of your promised clearance of misapprehensions between Master Holte and myself at present. Leave it, indeed, all to me, who best know on what his doubts may arise. Brother, I will attend you in your chamber immediately,' said Richard, eagerly preventing his father's evident intention of saying something, of a reconciling nature probably, but which would more certainly have brought about the public explosion he was anxious to avert.

'Come, then. I shall be prepared for your suitable reception, Master Grimsorwe,' Edward replied, with every species of contempt and wrath in his accompanying glance. But he also felt how desirable and necessary it was to shun a quarrel with his traitor brother under so general an observation as now attended them.

Sir Thomas, for a man of his violent and imperious temper, had a singular habit of submission to Grimsorwe's wishes. He desisted, therefore, from any further interference between his sons, though pretty well aware of some exasperated state of feeling between them.

Not that he in the least suspected the atrocious plots and treasons of Grimsorwe in Birmingham. The latter had given another and most artful gloss to the alienation he knew must become apparent on his brother's return, and for which the scene Sir Thomas had witnessed, on Dorothy Firebrace's visit to Aston Hall, might alone have prepared him. But this new depth of treachery need not for the present be elucidated.

In other respects Edward had very fair occasion to ask some respite from society and conversation, on his return from his fatiguing excursion. He therefore requested to be excused from his father's now uttered desire that he would lose no time to dress, to attend the Prince's Highness at dinner. It was become the custom, it appeared, to serve a meal of the description in state every day at Aston Hall, where Prince Rupert had established his head-quarters—at its wealthy owner's earnest entreaty, certainly.

Sir Thomas, however, somewhat eagerly assented to the arrangement, while Edward remarked that his mother looked saddened and disappointed. But this was too much her usual state to set him on drawing any specially uncomfortable inferences ; and the important business he had in view to transact was not, he deemed, to be postponed to minor considerations.

In his secret anxiety to the effect hinted, Edward was even well satisfied to allow the interview Richard Grimsorwe stated it was his purpose to seek with him. Whatever else came of it, it was possible he should glean some inklings of what might have occurred in Birmingham since his departure. And if even the ties of relationship, and force of circumstances, prohibited his taking a just vengeance on his traitorous kinsman, Edward had yet a kind of pleasure in the prospect of letting him know how fully he was aware of his treachery and plots, and how hopeless it must be henceforth to hoodwink him to their workings.

He retired, therefore, to his usual chamber in the mansion, and there awaited the result.

The heir of Aston Hall, of course, occupied one of the best apartments in it. He had a suite on the first floor of the north wing of the house, the bed-chamber in which is now known as the State Room, from its being of latter times dedicated to the use of guests of distinction. Sir Thomas had declared his intention to dedicate this entire portion of the building to the use of a separate household for his son, as soon as his projected grand marriage with the Lord Keeper's daughter took place. But until the arrival of Prince Rupert, the only other person of consequence inhabiting this wing was Mr. Lane, the family chaplain. Count O'Taafe and some of the other officers were now quartered in it. But Lady Holte had taken care that her son's apartment remained inviolate.

Resuming possession, and refreshing himself from his dusty journey, Edward had nevertheless almost forgotten the expected visitation. When Grimsorwe arrived he was plunged in reflections how best to open the negotiations for a peaceful arrangement with the town of Birmingham.

Grimsorwe made his appearance, following a domestic who brought Edward a cover from his mother's dining-table. And to do him justice, steel-nerved and audacious as he was by nature, he looked pale, and clearly entered on the business he felt he must go through with very reluctantly. Nevertheless he had made up his mind what to do with characteristic boldness and decision.

While the servant was in the apartment he poured out a series of voluble congratulations and assurances of his unbounded joy to see his dear brother safely once more at home; taking care to make no pause for a reply that might reveal the real state of the affair. But the moment the man retired, he brought himself up at full check, and observed, with a bitter laugh, 'It is no longer necessary to keep up the farce; loosen the torrent, brother Edward, which I see in your face is ready to burst upon me, and let us come as speedily afterwards to the best settlement circumstances now permit between us.'

'You call me brother, and truly; Cain was the first brother!' Edward now replied; but he went on not at all with the invective and violence Grimsorwe probably expected. Contempt almost destroyed resentment in his breast.

'Well, then, continue my brother, in that early sense of the word: only understand that from this time forth I am well aware that I have a *brother* who is contriving by every means of forgery and false witnesses to oust me from my birthright, and bring disgrace and annulment on the lawful marriage of my mother with the father whose true inheritor I am—a brother who, in my late misfortune, left no stone unturned to procure my assassination or destruction at the hand of unjust power—a brother who, by fraud and the most audacious deceit and pretence, has robbed me, and another dearer to me than myself, of the proper rewards of our loyalty and devotion to our sovereign—a brother who, I doubt not, will continue in his villanous attempts, until I, too, forget the base mingling of our bloods, and crush him with my heel in the dust—like the serpent that he is!'

Grimsorwe looked a little astonished. He did not possibly know how much was known, but he answered with grim composure :

‘If you are aware of all this, Edward Holte,’ he said, ‘still, on my part, I am assured you have no means of proof of your allegations, and I defy your utmost hatred and malice to produce any.’

‘Dorothy Firebrace can witness—’ began Edward ; then reflecting on the danger of bringing her name into the discussion, he suddenly paused. But Grimsorwe had heard.

‘Is it even so?’ he said, with peculiar bitterness. ‘I mean, is it this meddlesome girl who has pretended to you all this strange catalogue of wrongs? But who will believe her besides yourself? Will our father, fire-sputtering Sir Thomas, who believes her to be your mistress and paramour—lay not your hand upon your sword ; I have purposely brought none—and knows her to be angered against me on some foolish trifle of womanish complaint, which she has exaggerated into a mountain of grievances to show off the brighter rainbow with true love and fidelity to you? Will the King, who knows her whole kindred and alliance for a pestilent nest of traitors and treason? And will it even be to her safety with her own mutinous townspeople, that she should declare to the world how she has played the eavesdropper on their councils for your sake, and exposed them to the imminent hazards and disasters that now threaten them, forsooth, in detecting me?’

Edward was, at all events, greatly struck with this latter view of the case ; but he endeavoured to answer as unshakingly as he could. ‘I shall soon put the Birmingham people out of all dread for themselves, Richard Grimsorwe,’ he retorted. ‘I bear the King’s assurance of pardon and peace, if they are willing for it ; and then how say you?’

It was not a discreet revelation. Grimsorwe’s livid complexion deepened in its deadly hues.

‘And then how say I?’ he repeated. ‘No, Edward Holte ; I answer, how now ! now that the suspicions and anger of the Birmingham rabble are thoroughly roused against your grimy Venus—now that they are well assured she has taken part in your escape, yet know not that was the sole means which thwarted a plan that would have concluded the war at a stroke—I answer, and I tell you, either you shall solemnly promise me never to reveal aught concerning me or my objects you may think you have learned by the agency of that artful girl, or, driven to despair, I will pass over openly to the Parliament, and reveal to it and the angry townspeople of Dorothy Firebrace all she has done to betray and injure them.’

Edward was, no doubt, greatly startled at the prospect of the calamity denounced.

He knew the tangible proofs that existed of Dorothy’s aid to himself, and the penalties she had incurred under the martial law proclaimed in Birmingham on the day of his flight. All the goodwill and energy of her friends, he felt, could not protect against the rigour of the Parliament, if it was directed so formidably against her. No man knew to what extent that body might carry its terrorism or vengeance after the mighty examples that had been made, and which caused even the Queen of Charles I. to tremble for her own safety in his palaces and castles.

But his consternation was much increased when Grimsorwe, perceiving the effect produced, informed him that before he left the town, Sisypheus the bellows-blower had raised a great tumult among the lower classes of the people of Birmingham who had thronged to Firebrace's house, declaring they would have vengeance on the false townswoman that had deprived them of their hostage against the vengeance of the cavaliers at Aston Hall: a tumult which he stated had been with difficulty baffled in its objects by Tubal Bromycham, who, at the head of his young men, had violently dispersed the mob. But Major Monk still remained in the town, and had written an account of all he knew of the occurrences to London. If proofs were then forthcoming of Dorothy's full complicity, what might not be expected in the way of vengeance and satisfaction to the exasperated people on the Parliament's part? And Grimsorwe's evidence would supply all that could be required in that direction.

For the second time, of late, Edward Holte found himself totally overmatched and discomfited by the skilful combinations and remorseless use of means by his antagonistic brother.

His apprehensions for the generous Dorothy's safety were, in fact, too great to allow him to reason very maturely on the subject. Restrained also as he was from vengeance of a personal nature on the treacherous villain, little was to be gained by holding out as if he projected it; above all, it was necessary to gain time and opportunity for his plans of reconciliation between the town and its offended Prince.

Accordingly, when Chaplain Lane, secretly sent on the errand by Lady Holte, presented himself shortly afterwards, as if to congratulate his favourite pupil and friend on his return—in reality to preserve the peace, if there was need—he found the two brothers quietly, though sternly, concluding upon the articles of their compact.

No writing was of course employed. Nor did Edward in the least confide for observance of the conditions on Grimsorwe's part, in anything but his belief that it would seem in his interest to observe them.

Edward was to make no further complaints to his father, or declare more fully what he conceived to be the designs entertained by Richard Grimsorwe, and the means he was believed to have adopted to put them in execution. Grimsorwe was to keep concealed all that he supposed himself to know, or in his rancorous heart really knew, of Dorothy Firebrace's acts to achieve her lover's escape, and the King's deliverance from the great danger that had menaced him.

Chaplain Lane was a man of the greatest simplicity of character and tenderness of heart; too guileless himself to suspect almost the possibility of such a serpentine nature as that of the bastard son of his patron; too full of the milk of human kindness to doubt the easy forgiveness and reconciliation of two persons allied by blood, whose bitter reasons of animosity he was not aware of; he readily, therefore, mistook the calm and settled tone he observed between the young men on his arrival, as rendering his interposition unnecessary, and scarcely understood why Edward pressed him to remain, until Richard Grimsorwe, rising, took an apparently friendly though rather ceremonious leave.

No sooner, however, had he passed out of the 'State Room,' ere Richard muttered to himself, grinding his sharp white teeth :

'Easy fool ! to dream that Richard Grimsorwe is the slave to sit down contented in failure and defeat, and leave the man and the woman—nay, the woman and the man—he most detests on the face of the earth to triumph over him !'

CHAPTER LIII.

A DRINKING BOUT TWO CENTURIES AGO.

ON the whole, Edward was not displeased to be rid at this moment of the necessity of carrying out the quarrel with his treacherous brother into all its harassing consequences, and interruption of his more important business. He felt there was no time to be lost either in his affairs of love or policy.

The discomfort, and perhaps danger, of his beloved Dorothy's position were pressing considerations. The King's changeableness of purpose, and unhappy habits of double dealing, rendered it very advisable to proceed at once to engagements which he could not decently annul or counter-act, formed on the basis of his royal word.

After much reflection Edward decided on his course of action, and on the proper agencies to be employed ; greatly annoyed, but perhaps hastened in his resolves, by some circumstances which added to his convictions that Aston Hall was not likely to remain very comfortable quarters for himself in the objects he had in view.

The mild spirit and timidity of old Mr. Lane clothed his statements in the most inoffensive words. But Edward could readily gather that the Prince, who was likely to prove his strongest opponent, was established in full sway and supremacy in the house ; treated more, indeed, as if he had been a god than a man, and gratified in every whim and wish. Nay, the poor chaplain faintly hinted, with a slight pinky flush on his pale lean cheeks, too conspicuously so as regarded the beautiful daughter of the house, for whom Rupert openly professed an outrageous dragoon-like kind of admiration, which he took rather extraordinary means to display.

For example, he had possessed himself—how the chaplain knew not—of a breast-knot of scarlet and black ribbons worn by Miss Holte, and carried it now conspicuously stuck in his hat, in sign that he had dedicated himself as, what was then styled, one of the young lady's *servants*, or, as we should say in these times, suitors ; though perhaps that word expresses too much, as it did not follow that the 'servant' aspired to the honour of his mistress's hand in marriage. It was merely a vestige of ancient chivalric custom, when a knight would assign the service of his puissant arm and obedience for a time to some princess or forlorn damsel in need of aid ; most probably from the oppressions of a giant or enchanter.

Edward liked not much of this, knowing, especially, as he did, his sister's character ; the vanity and coquetry which actuated her in her

notions on such subjects. He was aware of her extreme beauty and unbounded powers of fascination; but he was also much better aware than his father—having been in Germany, accompanying Lord Falkland on a secret mission connected with this very family—of the insuperable obstacles to any likelihood of a desirable termination of such an affair, in the pride of royal birth and position of the Prince Palatine of the Rhine.

It mattered little that, with the other personages of his family, Rupert was a landless exile and fugitive from his native country. It was well known that the descendants of the unfortunate Elector Frederic, who had lost their wealthy and beautiful inheritance in the attempt to grasp a crown, cherished always the hope and purpose to retrieve everything by the sword.

Nothing was certainly to be hoped from the justice or mercy of the house of Austria, or of the Duke of Bavaria, to whom the exasperated Emperors of Germany had transferred the dominion. But even in offering his sword to his uncle in the English commotions, it was believed that stipulations in favour of an attempt to wrest the Palatine back for its original owners were enforced upon Charles. And the King, on his own part, was sufficiently bound by the ties of blood and former treaties to be willing to hazard much on the behalf of his sister's family, in the event of his own triumph in England.

All this made Edward greatly regret the circumstance of Prince Rupert's being so intimately domiciled at Aston Hall.

The only remedy would seem to be to endeavour to withdraw his sister herself from the perilous neighbourhood. And strangely infatuated, by his own pride and ambition, as he knew his father to be, Edward thought it impossible he could remain blind to the considerations he felt it would be his duty to urge upon him.

And these feelings of irritation were not soothed by the discovery he had made, in the course of the evening, of the kind of near neighbours he had himself acquired.

Towards midnight Edward Holte was startled by a sudden laughing uproar and confusion on the oak staircase, by which the north wing of Aston Hall is ascended; and found, on listening, that Count O'Taase was being escorted by a party of riotous officers, only not quite so drunk as himself, to the apartment assigned him in that division of the house now called the Chinese Room, from the frightful Oriental paper with which its walls are disfigured.

Among the voices—evidently perfectly indifferent to any neighbour's rest being preserved, or ignorant they were breaking it—Edward distinguished that of Prince Rupert, hectoring and peremptory, even in what was as clearly his own personal vinous elation. But still more vexed, and even alarmed, was he to recognise the impudent vivacious accents of Cornet Titus; since it showed with what rapidity he had been despatched after himself from Nottingham.

The revel was, in fact, very possibly in celebration of this officer's return to his corps.

Prince Rupert's dragoons were always glad of an occasion of the sort, or any other pretext, even when they feasted at their own expense, which would

not now be the case. But it was likely enough the cornet brought acceptable tidings to military men, who must have felt themselves rather disgracefully foiled in their recent movement.

But what annoyed Edward the most was to hear, by his father's voice amidst the tipsy tumult, that he was clearly as far gone as any other there; or even worse, for he heard him bawling orders to some servants below to bring up a six-gallon cask of cider 'to drink off what they had drunk,' as he was pleased to express himself to his wild companions.

Not but that Edward was well aware his father was a stout comrade at his cups; as was then generally the case, even among persons of the highest rank and gentility. King James I. had introduced the custom from his own hard-drinking land, and all the stately decorum and sobriety of his successor had failed to do more than check the passion somewhat among the new generation. But even that degree of good was likely to be neutralised by the habits of camps and warfare, on which the nobility and commons of England were henceforth for a long period to be cast.

Discomfort of mind would have prevented Edward from sleeping now, but the noise of the revel alone sufficed; and it was kept up for a very considerable interval, through most of the variations of a drunken debauch of the kind.

It seemed to Edward as if his father's house was turned into a riotous barrack, under his father's own leadership and prompting.

Songs were sung, evidently of a camp and bacchanal description, since they were received with shouts of laughter, and ever and anon roared to in chorus by the whole company to a clattering of swords and spurs.

Healths were as clearly given and as enthusiastically welcomed, but one in particular was received with thundering acclamations, and a curious noise that resembled the clash of a number of men-at-arms bringing their weapons and knees to hard ground to repel a charge of cavalry. And, to Edward Holte's extreme vexation, loudest above the deafening yell of military applause he distinguished his sister's name in the fierce accent of the Prince Palatine, and flourished with a German 'Hoch, hoch, ad cælum!' ('Hurrah, hurrah, to the skies!')

To crown all, this wild glorification suddenly passed into another, but by no means unusual variation, in the display of the effects of too much liquor on men of such make. Edward almost immediately after distinguished a burst of voices, in very changed accents of fury—of expostulation—of enquiry—and then an universal confusion and uproar.

Some sudden quarrel and outbreak had clearly taken place; in which the heir of Aston would have interested himself very little had he not known that his father was one of the party, and remembered how choleric and passionate he was upon the least provocation. And, moreover, he discerned his father's in the rageful, though nearly inarticulate, tones that first reached his ears after the burst. Those of Cornet Titus next, shrieking almost with defiance and insult, as well as he could find utterance for drunkenness and rage. And lastly, the loud tempestuous thundering of the Prince, apparently endeavouring to enforce peace and order by dint of out-furying every other effort at exasperated expression.

By this time Edward, throwing on his chamber-robe, and snatching up his sword, had made his way to his own door. And he arrived just in time to distinguish somebody hurled headlong out of the apartment opposite, and sent at a whirl, with very slight opportunity of resting his feet, down the oak staircase. The person, indeed, went past him with the heavy whirr of some missile discharged from a cannon.

Edward had no light to see who or what this object might be; but, alarmed with the notion that it might possibly be his father, he hastened as fast as he could tread down the stairs after it; and, to his unbounded alarm and consternation, found he set his foot, at the bottom of the whole flight, on the body of a man, lying there insensible, possibly in a degree with drink, but also not improbably stunned by his descent into unconsciousness.

At all events he made no answer to Edward's repeated demands to know who he was; and terrified and excited by indignation almost equally, the young man flew up the stairs again to knock at O'Taafé's door, and require a light and an explanation.

To his astonishment, however, not being personally much accustomed to such scenes, the previous joyous uproar had been already resumed. And to such an extent, that all the clamour he made for admittance either passed unheard, or only provoked peals of laughter from the revellers.

Such were at least very audible after each more violent renewal of his attempts to make himself heard. And it was impossible to enter the room without help from within, as the door could be secured by a massive iron bar, which Edward found was placed in the staples.

Edward finally abandoned the attempt on distinguishing his father's voice, who was clearly safe and sound within, since he was yelling a part in some uproarious song; at all events, joining in the wild military clashing of the time, for the song was in French—a language in which Sir Thomas Holte prided himself on having always found it impossible to acquire a single word.

Count O'Taafé, apparently revived from a more torpid state of inebriation by the recent concussion, trolled the leading part in rich, jolly, unctuous tones, though interrupted by occasional hiccoughs. It was a lay, however, of a kind which would scarcely bear Englishing, to a modern audience.

Edward did not await the whole bacchanal ditty out, but retired from his useless application when once he had ascertained his father's safety.

From motives of humanity, very undeserved if he had been aware of the full facts of the case, he then returned to see if he could render any assistance to the expelled member of the riotous jollification. But on reaching the foot of the oak staircase the fallen carcass was no longer to be found there; and grope about and feel with feet and hands as he might, and demand to know what had become of the victim as he did, all was in vain. No traces of him remained.

Satisfied on this score also that the expellee could not have been so much injured as he had feared, since he was enabled to take himself from the field of disastrous experience, Edward now again retired to his own apartment,

In reality he felt it would be much the best for him to make no appearance in a drunken revel, whose members seemed so ready to take offence, and exhibit violence. He determined even, unless he found his duty as a son, or some point of honour in that punctilious age engaged, to take as little further notice as he could of an occurrence which he could not think would prove in any case to redound to his parent's credit.

It would be necessary, however, for him, he knew, to ascertain, as quietly as he could, the occasion and circumstances of the quarrel.

It was plain the sense of the company was against the person who had been expelled with so much violence. But if Sir Thomas had resented some affront, real or imaginary, in his customary furious and headlong style, there was reason to apprehend a serious imbroglio. In such a case his age might be held to excuse him from granting the kind of satisfaction most likely to be demanded. But his son must step forward in his place; and Edward's real affection for his father, as well as his own high spirit, suggested to him that he ought to take the earliest opportunity to place himself, if necessary, between him and his antagonist. But this conviction added of course greatly to his anxieties and perplexities; and with all the reason he knew he had to confide in his skill at his weapons, the idea that he might probably be called upon to put himself in jeopardy of being disabled from his pressing personal affairs, annoyed him extremely, and effectually banished sleep from his pillow nearly all the night.

Some time afterwards he had, however, the satisfaction to hear Count O'Taase's apartment cleared, as he supposed, of all his visitors, who descended the oak staircase in a quieter style than they had arrived, their heavier liquors having mostly fumed off, and the tart cider in reality assisting in the sobering.

Perhaps, also, some of them had become alive to impressions of a painful and disastrous character from the events of the evening. Rupert himself spoke now in a low and rather dulled undertone, and Edward distinctly heard him—as if just for the first time made aware of the fact—tell his companions to make no noise, lest they should disturb young Master Holte, who slept, he was told, in the chamber high at hand.

CHAPTER LIV.

FATHER AND SON.

WILLING to have his uneasiness either confirmed or removed at the earliest possible opportunity, Edward accordingly only awaited the dawn ere he dressed and presented himself at Count O'Taase's apartments for an explanation.

Contrary to the fact of the night before, he found the entrance unbarred; and desirous to excite no superfluous attention to his proceedings, he pushed the door open at once, and entered.

Greatly surprised, however, was Edward Holte—surprised and more

shocked and alarmed—when the first object he discerned proved to be Sir Thomas Holte himself, lying fast asleep in an arm-chair.

The early morning sun was beaming in through the latticed panes of the window full on the baronet's drowsy visage ; and Edward Holte, who had scarcely ever before dared to make his father an object of direct scrutiny, now gazed with a singular mixture of emotions at the figure before him.

He perceived with pain that, relaxed in slumber from their habitually haughty and domineering expression, his father's features betrayed very manifest tokens of a mind but ill at ease.

Unhappy remembrances seemed to cluster on all the sunken lines of his lips, and to give them almost a character of anguish. The marks furrowed on his brows by an habitual frown were distinct enough ; but the frown itself had vanished, and a gloomy, puzzled—one might almost say, dismayed and conscience-tortured aspect—had succeeded, which was even yet more uncomfortable to his son's observation.

With this exception Edward Holte's filial feelings were much gratified by noticing how little the progress of time had told upon his father's vigorous organisation. His black hair was rather grizzled, it is true, in the long clusters, but the noble though stern features kept all their lines unimpaired ; the bare muscular throat was as firm and unpuckered in the flesh as a young man's of half his years in these degenerate days. His whole figure displayed power and vigour of nerve and muscle in all its yielding of repose, which obviously needed only to be startled to exhibit the most strenuous activity. To be sure Sir Thomas Holte was little more than sixty years of age at the time ; and neither by himself, nor most of his contemporaries, was he considered at all an old man. At this age an Englishman of the old make began to reckon himself rather past his youth ; that was all.

Edward remarked with less satisfaction other circumstances of the scene.

A massive table in the centre of the apartment was covered with the remains of the previous night's debauch. Numerous pewter cans, out of which cider was mostly drunk ; an empty cask, stove in at the top, in which some flies were buzzing ; a plentiful allowance of smashed tobacco pipes—attested the character of the revel. Edward besides observed a dint in the wall, about the height of a man, much bespattered and streamy with the yellow liquor ; below which lay a bulged pot, which accounted for the whole appearance. A missile of this kind had probably parted from some irritated hand on the previous night, and occasioned the row.

As for the proper tenant of the apartment, whom he came to seek, Edward's attention was speedily directed his way by a loud snoring. And he perceived the count at some distance, cast in his full regimentals—boots, sash, breastplate, and sword—on a bed contrived in an alcove, which in modern times has been removed ; or else a less miserable resting-place than a bare mahogany table might have been found, not long ago, for the body of the unhappy rope-dancer whom the misdirected taste of a populace, and unnatural greed, consigned to a dreadful death. The traces of blood are indeed not easily obliterated, since even that

dark wood still retains a horrible outline of the massacred form deposited on it.

Edward's object was now to arouse Count O'Taafe, without disturbing his father. A difficult operation, as he soon found it ; for he was obliged to use some degree of violence, even to shake the count out of his drunken torpor. And when he did succeed in the effort, the leader, accustomed to war's alarms, started bolt upright from the couch to his feet with a hideous clatter, and yelling '*Aux armes, camarades !*' with a noise that awakened his lighter fellow-slumberer at once, clapped a horse-pistol to Edward's head before he could dream of such an encounter. Nay, perhaps, in the first tumult of a soldier's ideas on such an occasion, might have discharged it, had not Edward stayed his hand by exclaiming, 'My God, count ! I am Edward Holte ; what mean you by this violence ?'

'Ventrebleu ! I was dreaming I was again at the sack of Magdeburg, when the father of those two poor girls sprang at my throat to throttle me, though we all thought we had given him enough for himself in the head !' exclaimed O'Taafe, with rather a ghastly and bewildered stare. 'I am glad it is not the old madman again, however, for it was sickening work putting him out of his misery ! Who, say you, you are ? A gentleman on behalf of Cornet Titus, to our good, though something choleric friend and host, Sir Thomas Holte ?'

This was light enough. 'No, sir,' replied Edward, sedately, 'I am Sir Thomas Holte's son, and I am come only to ask of you the causes for which it behoves me, as my father's representative, to demand satisfaction of so much younger a man.'

O'Taafe stared, and looked puzzled for a moment ; but he was about to reply, probably with an explanation, when Sir Thomas peremptorily interrupted. And certainly in other respects he had started awake with a full restoration of his wonted despotism and control in his looks. But yet there was something closely resembling a blush of shame in all the fiery anger of the colour that mounted to his visage as he spoke.

'Never answer a word on the subject, Count O'Taafe,' he said. 'I shall hold you for no friend or well-wisher to your host and entertainer, if you do. The quarrel is altogether mine ; and, as I informed the fellow himself, when the Prince flung him out of the room, he would find me here ready to answer in aught he may have to allege against me in the matter. Edward, I command you, ask no further questions in it. What I did was rightly done ; but I will suffer no man but myself to abide the consequences of an act which as father of—I mean, I repaid an insult with an insult ; and if the jackanapes, whose skull I laid open with a cider pot, needs any further satisfaction, my arm is as unwithered, and my courage as good, as any malapert boy's in the kingdom, to do me right to the fullest extent.'

'Malapert boy, my dearest father ?'

'Your father speaks not of you, sir, but of Cornet Titus, who is indeed the impudent young saucebox rogue—I could slit his tongue myself, for a demi-stiver ; it is always making mischief—yelping on a

false scent, and spoiling the run for the whole pack, d—— him ! But the Prince himself, I think, will hardly suffer any interference but his own in the affair. It was he who assisted the cornet to make such a nimble exit out of Sir Thomas's way, that I fancy he never lifted his feet but once from the top of the staircase to the bottom. Yet he seemed well and lively enough after the exercise, too, for he came back for admission in a few minutes ; but we only laughed at him while he made hammers of his knuckles on the good oak door.'

Edward hastily explained that it was himself who had so applied, being alarmed with the noise and tumult, stating also that he had left the body of a man stretched at the foot of the stairs seemingly insensible.

'Oh then, *ma foi* ! he may be lying there still, for I do not remember any of us looked after him again, and his Highness gave him as handsome a fling as a stone from a wall in an escalade,' observed the count. 'Come, Sir Thomas,' he added, with a wink, 'let us go and see whether our young gentleman is still taking his ease at the bottom of the stairs or no.'

'I will enquire meanwhile elsewhere,' said Edward, who very well knew the man was not to be found where it was proposed to seek him, and who now determined to anticipate his father's researches with the cornet ; and unmindful of the laws of precedence, he had stepped before his father and his father's guest, when the door suddenly opened, and the person in question himself appeared.

Not alone either, for Prince Rupert was beside him.

Edward faced the intruder, and by no means with any reflection in his own of the impudent smilingness of recognition in Cornet Titus's visage, otherwise slashed with a wound like a sabre-cut, and considerably bruised.

'I sought you, sir,' he exclaimed, fiercely. 'I hear you have insulted my father, and demand satisfaction.'

'Well, then, I'm here to beg your father's pardon, if need be, on both knees, Master Holte, on my Prince's command. And I am besides at present rather *hors de combat*, with a couple of sword-thrusts in the arm and hand, which his Highness did me the honour to inflict this morning, in full satisfaction for the affront he put upon me last night in escorting me headlong out of the company, which I deserved for my rude behaviour,' said the submissive loyalist, pointing emphatically to a ripped sleeve and bandaged arm, which Edward only noticed then.

'Your business is altogether with Sir Thomas, cornet ; lose no time on the way,' said Rupert, with a frowning glance at the obstruction ; and Titus immediately took the hint, in his own way, however.

Approaching the angry and disdainful-looking baronet, he said, very loudly and distinctly, 'I have to beg your worshipful forgiveness, Sir Thomas Holte, for my indiscreet allusion to the honourable young lady, your daughter, in relation to his Highness's well-phrased and most honourably meant toast. He is not Achilles ; you are not Priam ; and Miss Arabella Holte is not your youngest daughter, Polyxena ; and

therefore I had no occasion to wish a better termination to the tale than for his Highness to lose his life from a birdbolt in the heel, by archer Paris shot. Do you grant your pardon, sir, or must I kneel for it too ?

‘Kneel to God, to ask Him to make you less of an impertinent jackanapes than you are ! But trouble me no more with your senseless buffoonery, man, which is yet as full of mischief as a barrel of working yeast. Put a bung in your mouth henceforth, and let us have done with the whole foolery !’ said Sir Thomas, in great confusion and exasperation, evidently at the revelation of the cause of quarrel before his son. Then, turning with an air of laboured indifference to the Prince, he said, ‘But your Highness has in this hardly used me well ; the minion’s punishment should have been mine office. Howbeit the hide is curried now, and there is nothing more to be said on the subject. Does your Highness’s mind hold constant about our faring abroad to-day with the hawks ?’

‘Most certainly, Sir Thomas ; but we must all make it our study that nothing of our last night’s foolish contention in our cups comes to Miss Holte’s hearing : and she promised to let me be her palfreyman in the sports to-day,’ the Prince replied, waving his hand to Cornet Titus, who made a deep bow and withdrew.

Sir Thomas also seemed anxious to finish with the scene.

‘I will go and see Robin Falconer on the business, then, at once, and let us soon all meet at a jolly hunting breakfast : ’tis a fair morn for the hawks’ flight. Thanks for your night’s hospitality, Count O’Taafe, and your goodwill for the morning, though it has not been needful to put it to the proof. Come, Edward,’ he concluded, observing the young man seemed to intend remaining, and yet with a pretty visible reluctance on his own part to taking him in his company ; ‘the Prince and his lieutenant doubtless have business together. Let *us* hence, so.’

Not seeing what better could be done, Edward complied ; and he and his father accompanied each other in a dead sort of silence out of the chamber.

As they did so a figure hastily disappeared round the first balustrade ; hastily, but easily recognisable for that of Richard Grimsorwe.

Neither Sir Thomas nor his son, however, made any remark on the circumstance, both of them being occupied in their minds with a very different subject. But still the baronet had no wish to enter even upon this ; and he adopted a judicious, though usually rather feminine policy, by entering, as quickly as possible, on an angry discussion on the one which was by no means uppermost in his mind.

‘You keep me company, Edward,’ he said, ‘and it is not amiss. I have not had any private talk with you since your return ; but what is it I hear of your strange interposition in behalf of those rebellious scullions of Birmingham, and prevention of the Prince’s justice and vengeance on them, as the malignant seditious and muck-heap of treasons they are, and have proved themselves ?’

To this speech Edward returned a temperate but firm reply. ‘I wish to bring back an important town to his Majesty’s allegiance ; not by severities to cast in its portion irrevocably with our enemies,’ he said.

'Marry, fine talk, son Edward ! But, plainly English'd, the story runs thus : You have a fair mistress in the town, for whose sake you will put aside all high considerations of policy, and hold back the sword from the necks of incorrigible traitors, whereby you will preserve a nest of hornets near us, when we might smoke it out now at a word for ever.'

'A mistress, sir !' exclaimed Edward, with indignation. 'I recognise my vile brother's suggestion in that word, whose dastardly violence towards a woman, and inducing you to break my safe-conduct, brought all the recent danger and trouble upon me. Mistress ! If you speak, as I doubt not, of Mistress Dorothy Firebrace, clearly understand, sir, that in any ill sense she is none to me ; that by her descent she is as good or a better gentlewoman than I can pretend to be a gentleman, and in all personal worth and virtue infinitely my superior. Nor should I dare to entertain a thought concerning her unless in all honour, and with a view to offer her my hand with my heart in marriage.'

It was a desperate venture. So Edward instantly after felt it to be, and would fain have recalled his word. But words are winged, and once from the perch cannot be whistled back.

'In *marriage!* Marriage ! Did you say *marriage?*' the senior roared out. 'Pray you, carry me with you, Master Holte. Marriage ! Marriage with a blacksmith's daughter—an old mechanical traitor's brat of a pretty face ! If I did not think you were jesting—to use the word—But we will put the matter out of doubt shortly now. You can no longer feign the impropriety of wooing a young lady to a husband's arms, whose father is absent and in mortal peril and jeopardy. My Lord Keeper is safe now, and his invaluable bauble, with the King. So my Lady Lyttelton came yesterday, with her good daughter, Mistress Penelope, to assure us. And as my soul lives, if ever you mean to inherit after me at Aston Hall, you shall wed the bride I have chosen you at the nearest conveniency !'

Edward perceived the necessity of withdrawal from so astounding a glimpse at his real feelings and purposes.

He had needed little convincing on the subject, but the utter hopelessness of obtaining his father's consent to such an alliance struck him more than ever. And with such an ambitious and insidious enemy in ambush to seize every imaginable advantage against him ! He did his best to retrieve the slippery step he had made.

'Well, sir,' he said, 'I have not yet, that I wot of, openly demurred to your pleasure. But it would ill become us to deal in weddings and rejoicings at such a momentous and untoward conjuncture in our King's affairs, and when we have as yet done nothing in fulfilment of our pledges to him ; with which his Majesty himself did feelingly upbraid me when I saw him of late at Nottingham.'

'He chose an ill time for his reproaches, then, Edward,' said Sir Thomas, rather soothed by the appearance of submission, 'just when your brother and yourself had hazarded your lives in his service.'

'My brother !' Edward exclaimed, but he recollected at the moment the terms of his truce with Grimsorwe, and did not follow on with

the proper explanation of his surprised and irritated accent on the word.

Sir Thomas remarked it sufficiently, however, to observe, 'Pish ! what rancour is this about a foolish wench ; as if there were only one in the world. I trow me, Edward, you will live to see the day when you will deem yourself as much obliged to the rival who shall ease you of your spoil as you now snarl and grind your teeth over it to an otherwise conclusion. Yet, as the King says, and as you say, we ought to fulfil our promises to him. But how may that be, if we have no arms : and how may we have arms except by lashing the Birmingham men like mutinous galley-slaves to their forges ?'

'It shall be part of the conditions of peace I purpose to make that they shall supply both parties indifferently ; there are smiths of both minds in the town ; and, besides, they are all traders, and will not mislike an open market,' Edward replied ; 'and, it must be confessed, Birmingham has generally preferred to be neutral in this way.'

'And is this noble blacksmith, forsooth, of Birmingham to be confirmed in his lordship and claimed inheritances, whereof part includes, as I have heard, the very land on which I have built so brave a palace that the Prince himself nothing disparages it in comparison with his own native electoral castle on the Rhine, which is one of the glories of Germany for magnificence and lustrous ornament ?' Sir Thomas inquired, with scornful bitterness.

It should be mentioned that Edward and his sire were now crossing the terrace, between the Hall and the Falconer's Lodge and other domestic offices of the building, which yet afforded a very stately and imposing view of a portion of Aston Hall. Sir Thomas looked round as he spoke, and took a long and deep inhalation, as if his fine stonework were also like some rich flower impregnated with sweet odours to the breath.

He cherished, indeed, a kind of passion of admiration and love for his noble masterpiece of art and expense. But Edward himself was glad of the pause ; it was, in truth, rather a puzzling suggestion, that made.

'It would really appear, sir,' he at last timidly insinuated. 'that the unfortunate young man in question has received some great wrong, ancestrally speaking ; but it will be for tribunals of the King's justice, most probably at some quieter time, to right him, if it may be. But meanwhile, I dare well assure you, Tubal Bromycham will never seek or wish to trouble you in your possession of this land. But for the Prince's Highness to compare it with the Castle of Heidelberg, it must be in a most unbecoming mock ; for the castle, when it stood, was a fitting residence for a mighty king, but is now little more than roofless wall and frontage, which all the hatred of the most savage of conquerors and ravagers—the merciless Tilly—could not hurl down its mountain crags, with an army of plunderers' aid.'

Sir Thomas reddened. 'It is you who mock and thwart me in everything, rather,' he said, angrily. 'I know not that the Prince spoke of his castle as it is now, or as it has been. All the world knows of the misfortunes of his glorious family ; you tell us no news there, Edward.

So, then, you promise me some manner of mercy and forbearance from the Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham, do you, whose title I propose to usurp, in due course of events, as well as his lands, and whose feet have figured in my stocks as those of an impudent rogue and vagabond? But some price will surely be demanded from me for so much goodness; and so, instead of marrying my daughter to a descendant of the Emperor Charlemagne, I must, I suppose, gratefully accept for a son-in-law a Walsall collier.'

Edward was now thoroughly stricken with alarm.

'Good God! my dearest father, what is this you say?' he exclaimed. 'I do trust you have no such perilous frenzy in your mind, for it is nothing more nor less, and puts to the hazard my sister's happiness, and all our honours, most preposterously.'

'Oh, to be sure, I am a foolish old dotard, in my second childhood—as weak in judgment as sinews, am I not? Prithee, when was I put in tutelage? Is there my Lord Keeper's seal to my superseding as well as your pardon for the traitors of Birmingham?' Sir Thomas answered, drawing up his towering figure to its haughtiest strength and majesty, and surveying—almost contemptuously, and with visible suspicion and anger—his finer-limbed and visaged son. 'You are the only wiseacre out of Gotham among us, I presume, Master Holte? and I, and even your scholarly brother Dick, must only go a moon-raking where you show us the fine cheese in the waters.'

'My brother again! And does he advise? Oh, my dearest father, we are all made the playthings of a monster of treason and duplicity, that are to beat each other to pieces jerked on his wires! I say it is downright madness to suppose that the King's nephew can ever be anything to my sister but a peril and a dishonour in the association of their names. For God's own sake, then, listen to me now! You know you have allowed me long as your Deputy Ranger at Sutton Manor-House. This haughty foreigner and I can never agree together, nor shall I be able, even under our own roof, long to keep at peace with his cut-throat ruffianage. Let me retire, therefore, to Sutton, and assemble there, and quietly put in harness and preparation for the war—if war there must be—the young yeomen of your tenantry, who are to form my troop of horse. But more than all—oh, a thousand times more—let me take my sister away with me to Sutton, to keep house for me. The place may easily be made tenantable and comfortable enough; and she will be safe from any unhappy coupling of her name with that of this royal soldier of fortune, who has evidently taken her into his besmirching homage and admiration.'

'Hear to all this whipping of waters! What's to come of it, trow, but froth? It must be, indeed, that I have been deprived for incompetency, and put in ward of this wise young gentleman, my younger son—at all events, in the counting of years. Hark you, Master Holte,' Sir Thomas now replied, with extraordinary vehemence, 'silly old Goodman as I am, I do yet think I discern my daughter's fair repute would run much greater danger of scandal, should I find it necessary to make proclamation to the world the way you propose, and declare that I find it impossible to trust her under my own roof in the company of a high-

born gentleman and prince ! Fie on you, for the mean, dishonest thought, which shows well what manner of consorting you have yourself of late enjoyed ! But, for the rest, I am well content that you should carry on your truckling peacemaking with the Birmingham mobsters under any other roof than mine. And methinks I could as little as ever guarantee your safe-conduct to the crop-eared knaves among his Highness's brave followers. Go, then, to Sutton, and begin there your game at soldiering in his Majesty's service ; but for a housekeeper, if one is so needful for you, invite thither your fair-faced Puritan Rosamund, the armourer's daughter. Take my word for it, there is no better cure for a runaway horse than giving him the spur till he tires ; and a surfeit of sweet cake brings a man soon to see and acknowledge that plain bread is the staff of life. To Sutton Manor-House, I say, then, with your fine mistress at once, and you will be the sooner ready to betake yourself to a plain but well-endowed wife.'

So saying, Sir Thomas strode indignantly forward, raising a silver whistle at his girdle, which he blew long and shrilly as he neared the Falconer's Lodge, while his son remained silent and sorrowful on the edge of the grass-plat behind.

CHAPTER LV.

THE HAWKING PARTY.

CONCERNED as he was at his father's dangerous infatuation, Edward could not at the moment devise any other means of counteraction than those he had thus tried and failed in. But he thought some hope might remain in his sister's own womanly sense and spirit, which he resolved to make an attempt to rouse before he took his departure. And he had now fully made up his mind to retire to Sutton, feeling that his remaining at Aston Hall was powerless to prevent mischief, while it exposed him to embarrassing supervision and thwarting.

Moreover, he speedily found Sir Thomas was either really offended with his interference, or held him to his arrangement to be rid on his own part of what he probably looked upon as an inconvenient and crosswork meddling.

Edward was, of course, but little in the mood for an excursion of the kind ; but, partly to promote his own objects, and partly conceiving it his duty, as one of the representatives of the house, he presented himself at the grand *regatta* which preceded the hunting party now in progress.

Breakfast it was called ; and a breakfast it was, in the style of our hearty ancestors, who, as yet, dreamed not of such wishy-washy foundations as tea and coffee, but began their feeding for the day with as substantial a meal of meat and strong brewages as the best of us can now hope to dispose of for dinner.

The repast alluded to was served in the Great Hall—almost, one might say, in the open air, the doors and windows on all sides being thrown widely open.

It was a gay and bustling scene. The Prince was to be attended on the excursion by nearly all his officers, saving only those required to remain in charge of the dragoons. About a score of cavaliers were therefore thronging in the chambers, divested of their heavier panoply, but still in their showy uniform, with white plumes waving to their girdles from their dashing slouched broad-brimmed hats ; with flowing locks, and curled moustache, and pointed beard, well oiled ; high boots and gilded spurs, the rowels being as large as sunflowers ; and graceful, short riding-cloaks, thrown carelessly over the shoulders, and fastened by an hussar-like lacing of tassel and silver cord.

Among these fine personages Sir Thomas Holte and his daughter were still conspicuous from the costly materials of their hunting garb, which in both was of light green velvet, profusely passementé, as it was called, with gold brocade in the young lady's case, and further relieved by a cap of cloth-of-gold, and a brilliant scarlet feather. But Arabella Holte was yet greatly more distinguished by her beauty ; and her brother's own saddening eye could not avoid appreciating the heightened dazzle and glow of his splendid sister's charms, under circumstances so exciting and gratifying to her vanity and inordinate spirit of coquetry.

Very few women then living in England could in reality have contended with the daughter of the founder of Aston Hall for the prize of beauty. But no other lady was present save her mother, whose weak and faded outlines scarcely at all arrested notice ; and the vivacity and grace of the court-bred younger lady contributed to produce her extraordinary loveliness with the most varied lustrous effects, and to render her, even more than by the natural gallantry of a military society, the centre of universal homage and admiration.

Had that been all, it would not so much have annoyed Edward Holte, who was very well accustomed to see his sister an object of gallant devotion on the part of persons of his sex ; but he perceived at once that a most particular and special dedication of his attentions was made to her by Prince Rupert, who seemed to have neither eyes, ears, nor understanding for any other person or thing.

The conversation was evidently chiefly between these two, and as clearly of a sprightly and interesting nature, since it even melted the saturnine reserve and hauteur of Rupert's usual manner, and lighted his harsh features, bending delightedly over his companion, as if by reflection from her laughing charms. And although Miss Holte had a remarkably fine falcon, hooded and chained by silver jesses on her wrist, to which frequent playful and fondling reference seemed made by the pair, it was plain to the merest novice that the bird was only a pretext and cover for the close and animated dialogue in which they indulged. Yet Sir Thomas appeared to take no notice, playing the courteous host in every other direction, with all manner of hospitable entreaties and recommendations of his viands—little needed, for the most part, by his military guests. And this after so recent and demonstrative a discussion, witnessed by so many of the Prince's officers in person, and probably universally reported.

'My father has gazed himself into a madman, at his fine house !'

thought Edward. 'Yet if even his ambitious hopes could attain fruition, would my sister's lot be a happy one, as the wife of a haughty insulting princeling foreigner like this, whose every look and glance betray the harshest pride and despotism of character? I trow me not, since Arabella is at heart herself as self-willed and disdainful of control and supremacy as he! And then, poor Tubal Bromycham! my mainstay and anchorage with him and the town would be gone indeed.'

The company in the hall nearly all stood to their refection, as was usual at an occasion of the kind, when out-of-doors sport was in forwardness. But huge masses of corned beef, and brawn, and fried venison, and mutton collops, disappeared under their exertions, at the long boards set with the hunting fare. As for the strong ale in the numerous hooped flagons, which two or three were expected to share, and the claret perpetually pouring from a massive silver centre-piece, representing a rock and waterfall, from which the guests helped themselves at discretion, in quaintly-wrought goblets and beakers of the same metal, it was who should do the amplest justice to the liberality of Aston Hall.

Meanwhile the wassail inside was not ill-matched with the lively stir and movement in the courtyard and terraces before the mansion.

Sir Thomas had determined to display his wealth and magnificence to the utmost, and all his choicest horses and hounds, well groomed and caparisoned, or straining in the leashes held by handsomely-liveried pages and other retainers for hawking or hunting, crowded the inclosure—men shouting, horses neighing, dogs barking, and the hawks flapping their wings and jingling their bells, in a bright confusion of colouring and sound, well canopied by a glorious azure sky, and the glow of a cloudless autumn sun.

Into this cheerful company Edward Holte made his way, without feeling himself much enlivened by the association.

Nor did he receive many marks of welcome. A brightening glance of recognition from his fond unhappy mother—a friendly squeeze of the hand from Chaplain Lane—were for some time the only signs that anyone observed his arrival. But while detained by the passing of a singular triumph of Adam Blackjack's skill in the shape of a besieged castle of gilt marchpane or gingerbread, thronged with figures and waving with little flags, on so large a scale that it was rolled in on a wheelbarrow—Edward became aware of a pair of eyes fixed upon him from a distance.

The eyes were those of Richard Grimsorwe, who sat in a recess of a window of the great inner chamber of the hall, known as the saloon. Completely alone, too; in the congenial shadow of the branches of a stately cedar that grew on the outside terrace.

He withdrew his gaze almost instantaneously, appearing to be deeply engaged in the perusal of a volume in his hand. But in that brief interval Edward had discerned a real fiendish and malignant expression of mockery and enjoyment in them, that convinced him his unnatural enemy appreciated the anxiety and trouble with which he surveyed the scene before him.

Edward's action was quickened by the species of echoing he found to his own fears in Grimsorwe's satisfaction; and under pretence of paying

his respects to the Prince, he gladly interrupted his public and yet apart confabulation with Arabella. Nor would he allow himself to be repulsed by Rupert's cold and formal acknowledgment of the civility, and evident wish that nothing further should ensue. He remained where he was, and his presence exercised an immediate and striking check on both the parties. The Prince turned haughtily away, and Miss Holte bridled, bit her lip, and seemed to seek some occasion to remove.

His annoyance much increased, Edward was about to speak to his sister and ask her for a few moments' private speech. But precisely then Sir Thomas joined the group, and pronounced the unkindly resolute words, 'My son, sir, has come to bid your Highness and his sister farewell. He proposes to fix the head-quarters of his troop of horse, for which his Majesty has honoured him with a commission, at a nigh royal manor-house we have in these parts—that they may be less in the way of your cavaliers. And besides, in truth, negotiators from Birmingham—and he persists in negotiation—would have but a sorry time of it among my tenantry!'

The Prince coldly made the remark that he trusted his own presence at Aston Hall might not be found to inconvenience its proper inmates; and a trumpet sounding at this moment for the hawking-party to form, he offered his hand to Miss Holte, and walked off with her at an unusually rapid rate through the company, which of course all made way.

Edward followed them with his eyes for some moments, and saw the Prince himself, as the manner then was, kneel to allow Arabella to mount the horse by springing from his knee. And he then most distinctly perceived that as he placed the young lady's foot in the stirrup, he stooped and kissed it!

What effect so extravagant a mark of homage from so haughty and exalted a personage would have on a vain, coquettish young woman like his sister, it was not hard to conjecture. And while the rest of the company trooped out after the pair, Edward turned with such an expression on his face to his mother—who did not go with it—that she almost cowered beneath his glance, and said, 'I cannot help it, indeed, my dearest boy; I can help nothing that happens in this house! But of a truth, either your father will plunge us all into misery and disgrace, or he will make his daughter a princess by a marriage with the blood royal of the land!'

It was in vain that Edward, highly provoked at the intimation, implored his mother to make some use of her reasoning faculties, and remonstrate with his father on the perilous course he was pursuing.

Lady Holte was a thoroughly spirit-broken woman now, and at no period of her career had ever coped with much courage or resolution against her husband's headstrong despotism. And when she found that Edward himself had dared to make remonstrances on the subject (which, by-the-bye, neither of them again more plainly alluded to), which had failed, she declared that any attempt on her own part would only provoke Sir Thomas to a still rasher following up of his own ideas. All that Edward could obtain from the nerveless lady was an assurance that she would watch most zealously over her child; and if the Prince continued

his attentions, engage him to some open declaration of his meaning, either by her own or her daughter's agency.

Meanwhile Edward's personal affairs and anxieties pressed heavily upon him, and he was obliged to adjourn for a while the consideration of his sister's perils in the efforts necessary to interfere with advantage in favour of the object of his own attachment.

CHAPTER LV1.

THE BLACKSMITH LORD OF BIRMINGHAM.

EDWARD HOLTE thus unexpectedly found himself sentenced to a species of exile from his father's house, and very few facilities remained in other respects at his disposal to effect the objects he had in view.

A messenger into the town must in the first instance be found, who would faithfully perform his mission, and could not be supposed to incur much risk in it.

These conditions he thought answered in the person of the Rev. Mr. Lane, whose mild and benevolent character secured him universal respect, and who was very well known in Birmingham.

The only difficulty was to overcome the extreme natural timidity of his character. But Mr. Lane had a great affection for Edward personally, and he agreed to everything required, when he found that unless he undertook the office, the young gentleman would again place himself, with no security but the good faith of some individuals in whom he declared he could confide, in the hands of the leaders of the Birmingham sedition.

Accordingly, shortly after the hawking-party set forth, Mr. Lane mounted a slow-paced ambling nag, and took his way to the town, the bearer of two letters, one directed to the Master Armourer Firebrace, and the other to Tubal Bromycham. A servant in the Holte livery was sent before with a white flag, and Edward accompanied the gentle priest to the exit of the park, giving him his instructions in detail.

Not knowing what might now be the state of Birmingham, or what fate might await his communications, Edward was determined to proceed in them without presuming upon any kind of goodwill or understanding with himself on the part of the two leaders. In both the epistles he merely asked for a safe-conduct, and assemblage of the Town Council, that he might lay before it the King's most gracious proposals to receive Birmingham back into his allegiance and protection. But Mr. Lane's private instructions were ample how to influence the two chiefs of the town, in case of any doubt or hesitation on their part.

Edward himself was to follow, at a suitable interval, to the barriers, there to ascertain results. And in his indignant feeling at his father's uncivil and peremptory proceedings, he determined not to return to Aston, but gave orders at once for a removal of his own more immediate personal appurtenances and servants to Sutton Manor-House.

When these arrangements were effected, and he had bidden his mother farewell, promising to see her as frequently as possible, and

earnestly renewing his cautions, Edward mounted his horse, and followed his missionary of peace to the town with his credentials.

But he encountered quite a different sort of a personage some time before he reached the spot where he had appointed to meet Mr. Lane, which was nigh the Butts Barrier, as it had grown to be called, where Grimsorwe had been stopped in his coach. A figure presented itself in his way, in the ordinary leather garb of a blacksmith, in whose herculean though stunted proportions Edward Holte immediately recognised the person of Tubal Bromycham.

A change had nevertheless come over the whole aspect of the Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham, as Sir Thomas Holte contemptuously styled him, which almost confused his now friendly rival's recognition.

Tubal Bromycham's energetic and mind-stamped features seemed to have acquired a new character of developed power and intellect, as if a sculptured lion had become animate with all the vital instincts and supremacy which a lord of the forest in actual sinew and bone could claim. This character of power had even attained that highest evidence in man's moral organisation, when it becomes, as it were, humorous and playful, from a sense of the futility of the resistances opposed. Edward Holte was struck with the bright and hopeful expression of Tubal's countenance, which exalted the rugged lineaments into an effect that, if not exactly what is called handsome, was something more engaging and noble than mere beauty of lines and colouring could ever produce. And yet—he knew not well why—this, as it were, sun-bursting of the brave soul through its clouds, in the grand artisan, troubled the friendly gentleman. He coupled it with the scene he had recently left, and saddened to think to what cause Tubal probably owed his Promethean animation of hope and energy.

The two young men saluted in the most friendly manner, Master Holte alighting for the purpose, as to an equal, which he was well enough inclined to admit Tubal Bromycham to be. There was no occasion for any explanations between the former supposed rivals now. Both felt and knew that Dorothy had rendered their present relations perfectly clear and satisfactory.

But very important explanations were to be exchanged respecting the business of the present meeting.

It was in answer to Edward's anxious inquiry as to what had become of his messenger, that Tubal commenced his statements.

'Truly, Master Holte,' he said laughingly, 'the din and uproar are so great in the town, and the rabble there growing so heady and tumultuous in its dealings, that the poor gentleman, as it were, lost his senses with fear. And though I assured him, and truly, mark you, that no man dares harm him under the safeguard of the Lord of Birmingham, did so implore me not to be forced to run the gauntlet of the crowded streets back again, that I thought it best to put him into cool and safe keeping in St. Martin's Church, as I have others threatened by the mob, and come myself to meet and tell you how things stand.

'But sure you do not mean to say, Tubal Bromycham, that the common sort are in the mastery in Birmingham?' Edward inquired, much alarmed at the intimation.

'They are striving hard for it, at all events, and under the leadership of a desperate and determined fellow,' Tubal replied, still smiling. 'Captain Cromwell—who has, it seems, left us to our own exertions for safety, after so committing us openly against the King—hath, besides, contrived us a legacy of tumults and all manner of refractory proceedings, by turning out our regular parson, and giving to the entire people the election of a new minister. And this is what the town is running mad upon just now, who shall be appointed to the vacant office, its sway from the pulpit, and emoluments; we of the Council, and most other upper substantial men, favouring a certain approved good preacher and martyr for the truth, who has lately fled hither among us, called Whitehall, and the rabble violently driving at placing a ragamuffin tub-ranter of their own—the Anabaptist knave, Sisyphus the bellows-blower—in Dr. Dugdale's pulpit and cushion.'

'Sisyphus the bellows-blower! The villain who assailed Mistress Firebrace for favouring my retreat, and who instigated a base attempt at assassinating myself when a prisoner in his custody!' Edward exclaimed, who was still by no means aware of all the disobligations he owed the man.

'The same; and who, in my opinion, projects even worse and wider fulfilments of evil in his rotten and rancorous soul, to judge by the strange blasphemous overtures and promises he makes in his speeches, to win the rabble over to bestow on him their votes,' replied Tubal. 'Yea, for he will have it that there are no longer to be poor and rich, kings, gentlefolks, and commons; but all men are to be equal, and to have all things in common. Beshrew my heart! if the rancid rogue means not our women too! for that the reign of the saints has come to pass; and he gives it out he knows by a vision and revelation he has received; that they have only to go in and take possession; to inherit the earth and the fulness thereof for a thousand years of happiness and joy—under, no doubt, his blessed sway!'

'Your women! when the dastardly cripple has even endeavoured to hound the populace on to the destruction of his master's daughter!' exclaimed Edward, flushing deeply with indignation.

'And that is, indeed, still one of his main cries,' Tubal replied. 'He and his immediate gang are as clamorous as a field of cawing crows that Dorothy Firebrace shall be surrendered to the people (as they call themselves), and tried with all solemnity by them for treason against the good town. I have beaten their heads about pretty sharply already on this, without beating the idea out of them; and they grow the noisier because a Parliament man—one Major Monk—who is among us, declares, on the other hand, that she ought to be sent to London for calm judgment, and proper either acquittal or punishment. The howling curs are not to be contented without the rending of her in their own fangs!'

'But truly, Master Bromycham—if you be, as you say, true Lord of Birmingham—you will not suffer such atrocious mastery as this is likely to prove to exalt itself over your authority in the town?' exclaimed Edward.

'It shall be seen! But why give you me not the name of Lord, then?' Tubal replied, the light quickening in his blue Saxon eyes like

the sparkles of a spear, and his strong hands knitting as if they grasped one. 'Howbeit, it matters not; men will give the name where they find the thing,' he continued, with a stern smile. 'And believe me, Master Holte, I am very specially glad you have come to witness—and report—how I bear myself in the rank and duties I derive from a thousand years of ancestry, and have resumed. They shall soon know in Birmingham who is lord thereof! But I cannot, as perchance you would have me,' he added after a slight pause, 'interfere to prevent the people of their free election, which they enjoy as of old right and privilege as any under which I myself claim and challenge the unlawful exercise of power that deprived me of my inheritance.'

'Is it not certain, then,' said Edward, much disappointed, 'that, the rabble being so much more numerous, the election will fall upon Sisyphus, whose means of mischief will thus be infinitely enlarged to the destruction of all law and decency in the town, and certain rejection of the gracious pardon and terms I bring from the King? For if once the mob are permitted so far to gain the upper hand, who will dare to do or say anything likely to be unacceptable to them and their leaders in their scandalous designs?'

'What are these terms?' said Tubal, suddenly assuming an air of dignity that greatly struck Edward. 'We will talk of the rest anon; but at present, I trow me, there is no man fitter than the Captain and Lord of Birmingham to receive and weigh the same.'

Edward briefly declared the advantageous conditions which he considered he had obtained from the King. An immediate cessation of hostilities on the part of the near and dangerously-posted Royal troops, and a full pardon to all concerned in the recent outbreak, on condition that on its part the town returned to its allegiance, and allowed its forges to be employed in the service of all purchasers willing to give a fair price in open market for the Birmingham manufactures.

'This were an undoing of Master Cromwell's work, with a vengeance,' said Tubal, relaxing again into a smile that seemed to indicate he saw nothing personally objectionable in the notion. But a shadow darkened over his visage as he continued, 'We must stipulate, however, on our part, ere we throw our barriers down, that the King's ruffians be removed from so nigh a neighbourhood to us as Aston Hall. And, by all that is wonderful and strange! I do marvel that your father, Master Holte, should desire his mansion and—and family—to be given over to such rough occupancy and society as we all hear the Palatine's troopers exhibit in their demeanour at Aston Hall.'

Edward endeavoured to conceal the effect which these words had upon him, but was not sufficiently practised in disguise to prove so successful as he wished. Even the eagerness with which he clutched at the escape from his own fears, he thought he could discern in Tubal's demand, was rather betraying.

'I do trust you will insist on that condition—my father has his frenzies on some points—that the soldiers shall be retired. I myself have found them such uncivil company, that I have resolved to withdraw to Sutton Manor-House.'

'You, Master Holte!' exclaimed Tubal, in spite, as it seemed, of a

resolute effort to suppress his emotion, turning pale. 'You to withdraw from Aston Hall to Sutton Manor-House! There is, indeed, then, no time to be lost. But yet, no, no; with all her pride and her ambition, her unjust betrayal of my love, I am certain that she loved me once—must love me still! And when she hears that I have proved myself her equal in rank; that I have restored myself with my own strong right arm to my rights, she will no longer disavow the love she once more than suffered me to believe she shared!'

'I cannot pretend to be ignorant that you allude to my father's daughter, Tubal Bromycham,' Edward now said, himself affected by the overpowering emotion which evidently dictated this outburst; 'and I am grieved indeed to be obliged to agree with you, that obstacles to your generous passion multiply in my father's insane spirit of pride and ambition, and, perchance, in Arabella Holte's recklessness of coquetry, and pleasure in the triumphs of her beauty and powers of fascination. Nay, for I must candidly add, that though I know not on what foundations you build, it seems to me scarcely possible that she can ever have seriously meant to encourage your devotion.'

'Ah, you know not, you know not; how can you know?' the young man replied, with passionate warmth. 'But I know. Oh, it is not in woman—in humanity—so to feign! What wanted she with the heart of a poor artisan to trample on that she should have taken so much pains to win mine? It was chiefly when I was making her the virginals in my Lady Holte's withdrawing-room, on which I know she still plays, for I have often stolen up since to Aston Hall, and heard the music bubbling from her bright fingers forth upon the night from the notes. And wherefore should she so often keep my company, then, when she could not but see the love and adoration in my eyes—and praise my skill till I deemed myself some god of my grimy craft—and smile at and encourage all the plain tokens of my overmastering feelings, until, until that miserable hour indeed——'

'When you declared your affection? But did not Arabella then most unkindly and repulsively expel you from her presence, and even carry her disdain and rejection so far as to reveal all to my father, and expose you to the consequences of his well-known violence and revenge?' said Edward, who felt an extreme repugnance, on his own part, to work upon the noble-natured young man's feelings further—as he so easily might—to his own advantage.

'It is true,' replied Tubal with a deep sigh, and a dark shadow crossed his brows. 'But,' he continued, with suddenly revived animation of hope and the loving credulity of his nature, 'must I not forgive her when I remember how beautiful she is—how proudly born and reared—how skilful in all womanly and ladylike accomplishments—how worthy to be the wife of a crowned emperor? Must it not have seemed to her an insult—an audacity beyond compare—a madness worthy, indeed, of whip and chains—for a mere artisan like me (as such only she knew me then) to dare to throw myself at the feet of one so exalted and so fair, and ask, as it were, an angel of heaven to become the wife of a poor smith of Birmingham? But soon, now, shall she, and all men and womankind beside, know me for who I am!'

'What purpose you to do?' said Edward, thinking it uselessly honest to argue the matter further at this moment.

'To let my good townspeople, in the first place, know I am their lord, and by such a means as I hope will stir Master Sisyphus and his fellows into open contention with me for the mastery!' replied Tubal, beaming joyously up again at the thought. 'But will you, on your part, run some portion of the risk, Master Holte? For I will let it be universally known in the town that you are come to treat of peace between us and the King—and we will make it openly—and measure strength with all gainsayers! Nor is the risk so great as you may well think, and Sisyphus and his followers will hope; for I have lost no time to arm some score young fellows on whom I can depend, and who are ready to obey my orders for life or death; for the Lords of Birmingham hold the right of both!'

'It is no time to question of rights too nicely,' said Edward, much pleased at this revelation, 'and whatever the risk, I am willing to incur my share of it.'

'You can speak to our burgesses then, and declare the King's favourable will; and, if need be, perchance to the people. I have no skill in utterances by way of words, and you are scholar-bred, Master Holte,' Tubal replied; and Edward cordially assenting to the arrangement, nothing more seemed necessary by way of preliminary, and the young men resumed the road into the town.

CHAPTER LVII.

EDWARD HOLTE'S MISSION.

HOWEVER well inclined to run any hazard in seconding Tubal in his resistance to mob law, Edward Holte was pleased to find his own eloquence not exclusively depended upon in the task. On arriving at the barriers they found a number of young men in readiness, who obeyed Tubal's word of command, and formed themselves at once into an escort to accompany them to the Guildhall.

These men were nearly all of the smiths' craft, which at that time was by far the most powerful and well organised of the trades of Birmingham. And Tubal proudly explained that, as lord of the town, all its inhabitants were bound to do military service to his banner when called upon. But the master armourer's authority as chief of the smiths' guild or company, placed it specially at his devotion.

It is very possible, however, that Tubal Bromycham's power was chiefly derived from the respect he was held in as the best artificer of the town, and his general courageous and popular character.

It is certain his now declared pretensions to a noble descent and rank were very far from injuring him with any part of the populace, saving the republican fanatics of the Anabaptist persuasion, who were at the time in a very low minority in the town. The smiths, indeed, were extremely proud of having for a leader a young man reared as an artisan

at their forges, and in their midst, but who also claimed to be legitimate lord of their town.

This civic force was armed with pikes set in long wooden shafts, and marched in attendance on its chief and his friend with some appearance of military order and discipline, Tubal laughingly explaining to his visitor that hitherto he had only found occasion to set his men on using the 'stick end' of their weapons. 'Come the need,' he added, with peculiar significance, 'and we will prod the rogues in the back with nine inches of as good steel as ever made a more honourable hole in a soldier's breast! But meanwhile, I have a rod in pickle for them they little dream of.'

With a special purpose, as it appeared, of spreading the news of the arrival in the town, Tubal directed the march of this body in the first instance to the market-place. The Guildhall, which was in New Street, on the site of the present Free School, could easily have been reached without passing through the then centre of Birmingham at all.

Almost as soon as the incomers passed the Butts Barrier, signs of popular movement and excitement became evident.

The streets were thronged with an unusual number of persons, chiefly of the lower order of the populace: and of these it was to be remarked that by far the most ill-clad and dangerous-looking carried various weapons, and not altogether of the rough and rusty sort one would have expected to find in the hands of the inferior classes of a town, on occasion of so sudden and ill-provided an outburst of warlike activity. There were to be seen muskets and pike-heads, set on long sticks, like cattle-goads, which their owners carried with considerable swagger and determination. Tubal remarked upon these men to Edward that Captain Cromwell had given them arms, during the late emergency, against both his own and the master armourer's advice; and that having been posted to defend the entrance of the town at the Parsonage, they had now the impudence to pretend orders from him to retain the house for their own and their leader's use, even before he was elected to the office he now also pretended to.

'But,' emphatically repeated Tubal, 'we of the leadership of the town prefer the honest man, Wrath-of-God Whitehall. For though he be a little cracked in his roofing, still the cracks let in God's wholesome light, and he speaks but of establishing Bible law to the fullest among us; of sweeping the hearth, and making the house ready for the reception of the Master thereof, by an universal cleansing and beautifying. Not a pulling down and defacing and mixing all things in confusion, and stripping men of all that distinguishes each from his fellows. By the mass; (though that's a Popish oath) I almost think the Anabaptist villain would have us go naked in the streets; and for aught I know, by-and-by, on all fours! And he hath had a filthy pond near the Black Chapel, that a duck, which would gobble at a swine's entrails, would not swatter in, consecrated—as he calls it—with some devilish ceremonies, and invites who will to come and wallow in it, and profess themselves thereby his fautors and allies. And there are not wanting a strange many more than ever before to take the summons, because he goes about declaring that he is appointed to the godly work of bringing us all to a level, and

rescuing all things to the common, as they were, he says, in Adam's time. Which truly might be when there was but one man and one woman on the earth, but must not and shall not be in Tubal Bromycham's; as the boldest and most headlong of the muddy rogues shall right speedily learn! For, howbeit, at present, there are not so many of them as to need any mighty suppressing, there is no knowing how they may gain ground, with such doctrines openly set forth and maintained.'

Besides the information thus received, Edward thought he could readily distinguish the members of this suspected and violent sect by their gloomy, fanatic visages, and challenging, scowling movements among the rest of the population. And few as they were in numbers, it seemed likely enough that the leaven of their pernicious principles might now become infused into larger masses, by the zeal and audacity of such a leader as the maimed but popular-tongued bellows-blower had of late exhibited himself.

So far, it was not easy to determine by what feeling the people hurrying along the streets were actuated; perhaps chiefly by curiosity, and some vague prospect of amusement, in sharing the commotion of an election by general suffrage.

The Presbyterian scheme of government in church affairs, which was then in the ascendancy in the Long Parliament, would have made a regular doctrinal examination and acceptance unto the clerical office necessary, in conjunction with the choice of a congregation. But Cromwell, who had passed into the more advanced stage of religious revolt and enfranchisement styled Independency, was glad of a pretext afforded by an old custom in Birmingham to declare that the place of the expelled High Church rector of the town should thus be filled. The custom related only to the minor incumbency of Deritend, but he widened its application to the whole town; and not, as we have seen, without some views of creating divisions and emulations in the place, which might increase the necessity and chances of his own arbitration.

But he had certainly not gone so far, in his wildest calculations, as to suppose that the Anabaptist bellows-blower—whom he himself looked upon as the refuse and scum of humanity—would dare to aspire to the vacant spiritual office and dignity.

On his part, Tubal Bromycham, with a natural instinct, supported the assertion of all popular rights, wherever they did not clash with what he conceived to be his own, as feudal chief of Birmingham. And he had, therefore, readily adopted the plan proposed, until he found what a dangerous candidature arose. Opposition then became necessary, and his energetic genius suggested it to him in the openest and most determined courses.

In the case of Deritend Chapel-of-ease the customary forms of a lay election were in use, in the exercise of this extraordinary, if not unique, privilege of the people of Birmingham to elect their spiritual guide.

The candidates were presented by a proposer and seconder to the people, and were then appointed to preach, upon successive Sundays, to all who chose to be auditors. After this preliminary, a day was named

for the election. Friends and supporters eagerly canvassed for votes; opposition colours were displayed; harangues, squibs, and angry lampoons distributed; the taverns were thronged with bawling, contentious partisans; scuffles and altercations took place in all directions. Finally, the votes were taken in the usual way, first by a show of hands, and if a scrutiny was demanded, by a regular poll, sometimes lasting for days, even in Deritend, where only householders had the right to vote.

Tubal had thrown himself in the outset of this more general election into direct antagonism with Sisyphus and his supporters. He refused, and with the general concurrence of the upper classes of the town, to allow the church to be, as he considered it, profaned by the heathenish and unchristian doctrines avowed by the bellows-blower.

Sisyphus was duly proposed and seconded as a candidate before the townspeople, in front of the Church of St. Martin, with Whitehall; but he was refused the right he pretended to of holding forth in the building in his turn. And thus the express resolve of the Anabaptist and his partisans to enforce his claims to occupy the town pulpit and declare his principles, as a preliminary to the election, seemed likely to bring about a collision of the parties. For Tubal, continuing his explanations of the scene they were coming upon, informed Edward Holte that having locked up the church, and placed it under guard to prevent the intrusion, he was in hourly expectation of some violent attempt to take possession of it.

This was the stage of progress in the affair when Edward Holte found himself once more on the chief scene of action at the Bull Ring.

This considerable space was now nearly filled by a confused multitude, evidently gathered together in expectation of something remarkable coming to pass. Windows and doorways were also occupied by the owners of the surrounding dwellings, happy to enjoy the spectacle without being forced to partake of the bustle and buffetings. Women were there in unusual numbers, as if they had some peculiar interest in what was happening, though of a divided sort.

Clarges, the drunken blacksmith's wife, who was amidst the crowd, standing with her arms akimbo, and rolling her large, bright, impudent eyes in search of some as yet unseen object, anxiously inquired of a neighbour, 'Is it true the bellows-blower will prove out of the Scriptures we have all a right to be rid of our bad husbands and wives, and betake us to others we like better?' While Mistress Mellons, standing in a jolly blaze of her autumnal charms at the door of her hostelry, with her hands set on her hip bones, sneered to a gossip of her own, 'Hear ye how the crippled beggar pretends to the pick and choice among us all, in the Lord's name, with never a plack to his purse, and scarce a hanging of rags to his tanned hide!'

'He shall find he has reckoned without his hostess—not meaning you, my fine madam—an' he do!' said a gaunt third woman, who happened to overhear the observation, in bitterly malign and railing accents. But she was too well known as the jealous and half-savage wife of Sisyphus the Anabaptist, to make it desirable to enter into a wrangle with her on the subject.

Edward was further well satisfied to perceive that the narrow church-

yard before St. Martin's, raised almost to a level on the inside with its walls by many centuries of graves, was occupied by another division of Tubal's smiths. Their leather aprons, bare arms, hammers, and robust figures testified this, and seemed to promise very indifferent success to an attack, unless of the most overwhelming numbers.

But in truth, when Edward looked around at the thronging and haggard masses of the populace here assembled, and remembered what likely materials want and discontent offered to the reported inflammable oratory of the Anabaptist, he scarcely, in his own mind, applauded Tubal's energetic plan, especially when he found that at all events Sisypus intended to present himself at the church for the purpose of formally demanding admission, at noon on that day, provided he received encouragement in a certain 'seeking of the Lord,' in which he and his most determined supporters were at the time engaged at the Black Chapel in Bordesley.

In expectation thus of wonders at hand, the arrival of Edward Holt and his companions did not excite so much notice as it otherwise we might.

Very few of the townspeople, it is true, recognised the recent prisoner, who was little known in Birmingham during his college days, and had been kept out of sight all the time of his captivity in Firebrace house, whence he had escaped in disguise. Everyone, indeed, knew Tubal Bromycham, but, excepting in his relation as the opposite leader to the expected assailant, his advent could scarcely be looked upon as the signal for any particular event, and it was events the people were looking for.

But Tubal proceeded to work out his plans of bringing to the most direct and clashing issue, as it would seem, the contest for the mastery in the town.

'Come, Master Holte,' he said, 'well bethought on. We will begin by letting the townspeople know our intentions, and his Majesty's goodness fully, before we set the grey-beards of the Council wagging over the news. Let us get up on the churchyard side, and I will introduce you to these scarecrow lookers-on, and you shall tell them all you have told me. They are of the lower sort of our commonalty; but such, have always so far seen, incline better to hear themselves spoken to by scholarly gentlemen of your degree than ill-phrased rascals of their own like this Sisypus.'

Edward, who was bred in sufficiently aristocratic notions of the superiority bestowed by birth and position, made no hesitation to comply with his ally's request.

Together, accordingly, they entered the inclosure before St. Martin's which was strictly guarded against general intrusion, and Tubal's voice of thunder speedily demanded and obtained the universal attention of the multitude.

He made no roundabouts of explanation. 'Hark ye, my masters he exclaimed; 'lend your long ears awhile to this worthy gentleman Master Holte, of Aston Hall, who newly comes to you from the King with very gracious proposals towards a peace with us, which, methinks as the Parliament has left us so unhandsoinely to our own resources, we shall do well to lend attention to.'

There was some considerable stir and movement among the crowd at this intimation, and several of the gloomy-visaged men alluded to as forming a portion of it, without mingling, glided out of the assembly.

Edward Holte meanwhile—willing as much as in him lay to support his ally's object—baring his handsome head, addressed the assemblage in a very different style. With a graceful air of deference, a sweetness and harmony of tones, a scholarly and elegant flow of language that became the friend and fellow-student of the accomplished Falkland, he addressed the good townfolk of Birmingham, as he styled them, and declared the occasion of his visit in the town.

An English mob, even of the most determined democracy of modern ideas, has a natural leaning to the aristocratic. We are chiefly democrats because we want to be aristocrats. Neither was it, as yet, the age of democratic opinion, among the masses of the people, so much in earthly as in heavenly things. Cromwell's sudden impulse had but stirred the face of the waters—not their depths—in Birmingham, as afterwards in the entire nation. For the most part the assemblage seemed to hear the announcement made with considerable satisfaction, though not without surprise; and when Edward had concluded his brief but exceeding appropriate and happily-phrased address, they said everywhere, 'It is Master Holte, of Aston Hall; he says the King wants to make peace with us. Let us make peace with the King, provided he leaves us our rights and liberties!'

Edward, catching these latter murmurs, earnestly assured his hearers there was nothing his Majesty had not promised to perform to give them every imaginable comfort and security; whereupon Tubal observed, 'Particularly the removal of the cavaliers from Aston,' which was re-echoed in a great variety of accents, and seemed to be accepted as a principal condition of the arrangement.

But Tubal was evidently desirous of some more direct confirmation, for he now called out in his stentorian tones, 'Shout then, mates, for Peace, the King, and Master Holte!' and the throng taking up the words, with the rapid vibrations of popular impulse, sent them in a rising and swelling wave of sound to its farthest skirts, where it rippled over in the voices of the more timid among the women and children, who had not ventured deeply in.

At a moment so unfavourable to his purposes Sisyphus the bellows-blower entered upon the scene.

The Anabaptist presented himself in a somewhat singular fashion.

He was scarcely garbed beyond the merest requirements of decency, and from his grizzly iron-grey locks to his naked, ill-shaped feet, he streamed with water and weeds, as if he had just been bathing in some muddy stream. Of course his maimed figure presented itself at its worst, and his virago spouse herself exclaimed, 'It must have been his witchcraft tongue! his witchcraft tongue!' To complete this strange apparition he carried a bucket of some black water, equally weedy and foul, by his hook hand.

Sisyphus was accompanied by a considerable number of the members of his haggard congregation, who, in sign doubtless of brotherhood, walked arm-in-arm. The eyes of these men were chiefly cast down, and

nearly all looked very pale ; but their brows were knit with sullen determination, and their tramp was solid and one as that of a herd of elephants. Their countenances were of the most vulgar and animal type chiefly, and contrasted in that respect with their leader's, whose fiercely fervid aspect testified to the possession of mental power in unison with his powerful and exasperate passions. But for these very reasons, perhaps, the general effect of the advance was the more sinister and menacing : a blind material force, under the control and direction of an evil spiritual agency, seemed there.

So at least it struck Edward Holte, observing the approach.

But what rendered the spectacle still more singular and questionable was that the five men abreast, immediately behind Sisyphus, all carried lighted torches, which smoked and flamed red and murky in the white dayshine all around.

The Anabaptist's favourite guard and henchman, Faithful Moggs, was in close attendance upon him as usual, his vividly-coloured hair looking as if it had recently been dipped in blood, and wielding his wonted weapon, a butcher's pole-axe. The gaping mouth and staring eyes of this bull-witted fellow did, nevertheless, not prevent the spectator from discerning an expression of fanatic trust and challenge in the zeal with which he kept his apostle's pace that promised no faint or half-hearted adherence to whatever obedience he might enjoin.

On the general assemblage the effect of this extraordinary arrival was doubtful and mixed.

At first there was a universal murmur of wonder and inquiry, followed by an explosion of derisive merriment. Then again, as the group came nearer to be scanned, curiosity evidently mingled largely in the popular feeling. So potent is the eye with the mind of man ! The meaning of the show thereupon grew to be most eagerly canvassed before it came to a halt, which it did very soon after, on the place of the Bull Ring. This gave an elevated stand for the Anabaptist, facing the churchyard, and his people then formed around him there, breaking into a harsh and untuned, but solemn psalm-singing, like the clamour of the waves on a sea-beach.

Edward Holte himself felt strangely impressed, while the populace became, as it were, hushed and awed to an expectant observation, inasmuch that when the Anabaptist, having reached his elevation and set down his pail, suddenly turned round to them and exclaimed, 'I come from bathing in Jordan ; but not to preach peace, but the sword of the Lord and of Gideon ! Who talks of peace ?' There was a moment of universal shrinking and silence, as if those who had so shouted found themselves rebuked and guilty of offence by one who had the power and the right to punish.

Tubal, however, broke the spell by answering from his neighbouring elevation, 'I did, and Master Holte, and all the good people of the town talked of peace, and do talk, bellows-blower ! And what have you got to say to the contrary ? Though, as for bathing in Jordan, you look more as if you had been dragged through a horse-pond, as would much better tally with your deserts.'

There was a general laugh at this retort, and a stir among the crowd,

as if people were shaking off some oppression and drowsiness in the air. Tongues were unloosed, and 'What does the fellow mean by coming such a naked muck-heap before us?' freely inquired.

Until now it did not appear that Sisyphus, on his part, had taken any notice of the group in the churchyard.

He was perhaps too earnestly engaged in arranging his ideas for the oratorical occasion before him. But at the name of Holte he started; his eyes glared up with a truly savage and wild-beast expression; and Edward, encountering his glance, was struck with surprise at the blood-thirsty hate and fury in the flash of recognition. Of course he was entirely unsuspecting of the bellows-blower's secret motives for jealous indignation against the preferred lover of Dorothy Firebrace.

Nevertheless, Sisyphus possessed one of the prime qualities of the leader of an ambitious minority—command of temper, and patience not to dash himself against too powerful obstacles. He had been at a stern school for that, as appeared from the deep-wearied traces of the German provost-marshal's lash round his back and chest.

'Oh, is it but you, Master Tubal, my newly self-dubbed lord, and so another usurper in the true Lord's inheritance, who longeth for the occasion to beat and slay His messengers?' he replied, calmly enough. 'Yet I scarce expected, I must say, to hear you are turned traitor even to your own treason, to cry Peace where there is no peace, and never can be till Antichrist be wholly subdued. And who is Antichrist?'

We are not about to inflict on our readers a fanatic sermon of the seventeenth century, though it is necessary to declare with what intents and issues this most remarkable one of the Anabaptist of Birmingham, Sisyphus the bellows-blower, now teemed.

This man was, indeed, in most important respects, a Mormon blasphemer, two hundred years before the accursed sect of Joseph Smith planted itself upon the face of the earth—and flourishes apparently upon it in a whole province and city, like Sodom and Gomorrah before the rain of fire.

And now Antichrist, according to the levelling bellows-blower, was embodied in all the powers and dominations of the earth as then constituted—kings, lords, prelates, magistrates, and rulers of every sort and degree; who must be utterly overthrown, abolished, and driven forth of the land, so as to remove every species of rivalry and contention from before them, ere the dominion of Christ could be manifested and openly declared in His actual presence to mankind.

It is true, Sisyphus took not upon him to declare a new revelation. He had not the infernal audacity of the later false prophet; or else probably the beliefs of his time seemed to him sufficient for his purpose. But with almost equal presumption and lack of authority, he announced the fulfilment of all the old oracles of the will of God, and that the time of the promised inheritance of the Lamb of the Earth had come, and had been communicated to himself in a stupendous vision.

He averred that on that very morning, when he was engaged in wrestling with the Lord in prayer for the sake of the people of Birmingham, and inquiring what ought to be done for their redemption and security, in the continued absence of Captain Cromwell and the dangers

that pressed upon them from Aston, he had suddenly found himself lifted from the midst of his congregation in the Black Chapel and carried through the air thousands and thousands of leagues in the flash of a moment; that to his great terror and apprehension of total destruction, being no swimmer, he had found himself cast into a deep running water, bordered on either side with palm trees and rocks blazing white with heat, and knew that he was in the River Jordan, hurling along with the flow of the current to the fathomless gulph of the Dead Sea; that while thus proceeding, shrieking with terror and stretching his arms in all directions for help, he was suddenly caught in the garment by a Shining Man, who descended from the skies in a 'flame of sunbeams,' and stopped at last and brought to shore, though his clothes were nearly all torn off his back in the efforts necessary to effect his salvation.

According, then, to this profane wretch—for it did not at any time appear that Sisyphus was really mad—the Shining Man, in a long conference, informed him that he was the Christ who was crucified on Mount Calvary for the sins of the world, and who was now a-weary that for so many ages, the immense sacrifice had been made in vain; and who was therefore coming in person to restore the entire earth to peace and holiness, and give the dominion thereof to the saints and faithful ones. So far, he and the stranger prophet, as he called him, Master Whitehall, were as one.

And the way—as Wrath-of-God, being partially inspired, declared—was to be made straight, the throne of the Lord exalted, His enemies put to the rout, Antichrist cast utterly in the dust. The King of Peace would then doubtless appear in all His glory, to reign a thousand years over the elect, who for that period would flourish without fear, without suffering or toil, or grief or death.

But whereas his rival candidate announced his intention merely to put the laws inscribed in the Mosaic dispensation into full execution, he, Sisyphus the bellows-blower, answered, 'Ere ye build, a clear place from the ruins must be spread before the Lord.'

Kings, nobles, prelates, and magistrates of every kind, being the visible form and outward limbs of Antichrist, must therefore at once be deprived of their usurping jurisdiction, and their powers thenceforth be exercised altogether by the messengers and prophets of God.

Himself, Sisyphus went on to state, was appointed such in the town of Birmingham, if he could find there sufficient helpers and witnesses to the Lord to support him in his efforts 'to make plain the way.' Yea, plain even as the sandy desert before the heavy clod of the camel on its way!

In this kingdom at hand there should be no more poverty, no more sorrow, no more hatred, malice, and uncharitableness; no striving of men against each other in the rivalry of love or bitterness of hate; no lying, cozening, cheating in the market-place; for all things were to belong to all in common, without distinction or distribution.

And here it was that the bellows-blower's instinctive power to sway and direct the fanaticism of his times, and the blind impulses of all ages among the multitude, appeared in a most extraordinary manner.

To Birmingham—which had, as it were in a leaping from slumber,

shown the most zealous forwardness in the work—was adjudged the high honour of making a still more decisive advance in it. But still it remained a marvel, Sisyphus modestly declared, how or why it was that a poor and lowly man of the town, maimed of his frame and unendowed with any good persuasive power of any kind—though, he trusted, a resolved and seasoned soldier of the Lord—was chosen out to declare the great tidings to the good town, and also to carry out the pleasure of the Lord, on the preliminary arrangements for His advent.

But with such a mission he declared himself graced, by the special favour and selection of the Shining Man, in the town of Birmingham.

No wonder it is that, finding themselves in almost all ages oppressed and unhappy, the masses of the nations ever cherish a sense of unjust deprivation, and a longing for change, which compose the sure and exhaustless armoury of the demagogue. But, on the whole, the doctrine enunciated harmonised extremely well with the religious fancies and exaltation in mystical Biblical reveries of the time. To behold the completion of the great work of human redemption with their own eyes—the visible manifestation of the power and glory of God to mortal vision—what a prospect was here to those weary and worn with scanning the obscure assurances of bygone prophecy! Nor can it be denied that to be called upon in the name of peace and all righteousness to help yourself to your neighbours' goods and chattels of every kind could never be a very distasteful doctrine to a needy and toil-worn populace.

Like the modern Socialists and Mormons, the Birmingham prophet took good care not to reveal the corruption of debauchery and materialism which lurked in the depths of all his fine outward religionism and restoration of equality and fraternity among mankind. The suspected secret immorality of his life—the accusations of enemies—the instincts of sagacious minds—alone drew the inferences, which he was artful and skilful enough to veil from the ruder apprehensions of the multitude by a really extraordinarily eloquent and powerful generality of imaginative description, in which he figured the original paradise of man's innocence and delighted enjoyment of existence restored upon this earth.

CHAPTER LVIII.

TUEAL'S GRAND ARGUMENT.

THE results appeared in a significant manner.

Aware of the power of outward symbols upon the popular feeling, the bellows-blower concluded his harangue by demanding if the people were satisfied to forward the cause of the Lord by giving him their votes and interest in the election of a religious ruler for the town? If so, they were to signify their consent to the passing away of all the old order of obstructions and usurpations to the glory of God, in a manner he should point out. Then, taking the largest of the five torches from one of the attendant Anabaptists, he presented it to the crowd, yelling, 'This is the usurpation of Charles Stuart, calling himself the King; are you

willing it should be extinguished?' And numerous voices answering 'Yea, yea,' he tossed and flourished it frantically in the air, scattering sparks and drops of fire in every direction, and then plunged it into the pool of dirty water at his feet.

He did the like with a second torch, which he declared to represent a persecuting prelacy; with a third, which he styled an unbelieving, poor-man-trampling magistracy, amidst the triumphant yells and groans of Faithful Moggs; with a fourth, which he denounced as representing all the false college and book-learning and teaching, the law-giving and law-making of Kings and Parliament alike. And then he came to the last of his five blazing symbols, which he seized with an evident increase of exasperation and ill-feeling towards what it symbolised in his thoughts.

'And this,' he yelled out, 'represents all that is to be hated, dreaded, and extirpated in all the rest—the proud Holtes of Aston Hall, who have brought the cavaliers into the country to harry and destroy us all, and who have already made corn so dear that the poor man can hardly buy him a loaf with a day's wage. I say, let us destroy the whole accursed, tyrannical brood, wherever we can find them, and lay the house of their cruelties and pride as level with the dust as the towers of Babylon of old.'

Strange to say, the very mob who but a few moments before had shouted for 'Peace, the King, and Master Holte,' now noisily clamoured vengeance and destruction on the whole, in their response to this appeal.

Tubal looked greatly vexed and nonplussed.

'We have done wrong to let those rogues fancy they have any right to a say in the town's affairs, the regulation whereof is altogether with the lord and substantial burgesses,' he said. 'But let them yelp their hearts out; if they attempt aught on you, I will make them corn rather a hard lesson out of my hornbook. Let us go now to the Guildhall, and determine matters with the men of judgment and estate. Perhaps these barking dogs will go to biting, and I had as lief it came to the argument of blows now as at any other time.'

'They are more likely to attack us where we are, nevertheless,' said Edward; 'or what is it they are shouting now?'

A little attention speedily made this point clear.

Sisyphus had dexterously availed himself of the emotion stirred in the populace.

'Why, yonder, then,' he roared, 'is the heir and representative of the whole wicked and masterful race of the Holtes, who has come among us, as it is said, to seduce us into making a truce with the devil, and peace with the hinderer of the Holy Ghost! Those who are in earnest in what you have said, let them then follow me over his insolent carcass into the church, where you have promised to place me in the old dumb dog's place we had erewhile; and whence I will declare to ye, at a much clearer length, all the will and purposes of the Lord; and thereby also shall we obtain possession of the person of the traitress and espial of the enemy, Dorothy Firebrace, who we all know is refuged in it, with other enemies of God and the good town.'

'Good heaven! is this true, Tubal?' inquired Edward, with much

more alarm than any apprehensions for his own safety could have aroused in him.

'It is,' replied Tubal. 'I knew no safer place, while I was bound to be absent from Deritend and the Moat House too, on this business; and so I have locked her safely in the church, with her friends the Coopers, and Mr. Lane. But she will be alarmed with this hurly-burly, which she must needs in part overhear, though not see. Take the keys, dear Master Holte, and go in and comfort her, while I deal with this clamorous rabblement.'

'Cutes, no, while I can be of some help with my sword by your side, Master Bromycham,' Edward replied. 'Let us make ready for an onset, for I am sure they purpose it.'

'Let them come then,' said Tubal, with a grim smile, 'and taste the fiery breath of Bromycham's dragon. Ho, William Moorcroft and Philip Smalbroke! bring my cannon-piece out of the church!'

Tubal, as he spoke, handed a bunch of massive keys to one of his burly smiths, who, with a comrade, instantly made for the porch of St. Martin's; and almost as quickly as Edward could utter a remonstrance against opening the doors at all, to everybody's astonishment the doors opened, and a piece of artillery, of unusual size at that time, appeared in the entrance of the church, ready to be wheeled out.

'It is the first gun of the size ever cast in Birmingham, and perchance may be the last, for our trade lies not in such heavy war goods; but out of its mouth will I speak what shall satisfy all gainsayers its maker and wielder is master here, as elsewhere,' said Tubal, with an expression full of the triumphant haughtiness of successful genius. 'Loaded to the muzzle, and all,' he continued, uncovering a tow rope round a portion of the deadly instrument, and tramping with so strenuous a gesture on the sulphured end that it lit instantly into flame.

'Bring my dragon forward, mates,' he then said; 'let these good folks see well what they are about; and if they need a second blasting of his fiery breath, keep them well off the churchyard wall with your hammers and pikes while I reload. We shall see which will be weary first.'

But the portentous appearance instantly produced its usual effect upon an unmilitary multitude.

Even trained soldiers are with difficulty brought to face artillery directly, and no sooner had the excited throng in the Jull Ring, ready enough for a hand-to-hand conflict with the defenders of St. Martin's, espied the ponderous instrument of destruction emerge from its porch, than a salutary awe was stricken into the whole movement, and it was brought to a sudden pause.

In vain did Sisyphus, who, with all his faults, was a courageous soldier, endeavour to revive the ardour of his backers.

'It is but to make a brave onset, and take the culverin from them. It must needs be awkward and badly fashioned by a toy-smith like Tubal Bromycham. Had I but my arm and hand, I would soon let you see my meaning. Tie on ye, cowards! are ye turning tail already, before we know whether it will even go off or no?'

Yet the alarm had increased into panic in this brief interval, when

Tubal, out-thundering every lesser sound, and holding the burning tow aloft with one hand, while with the other he pointed to the hour-hands on St. Martin's clock, shouted, 'Make the best of your next five minutes hence, my good friends, or you shall know to your costs whether Tubal Bromycham has spent all his leisure hours since these wars began for something or for much !'

This assemblage certainly was not disposed to doubt the skill in any species of manufacture in the stubborn metals of the prime artisan of the town. In spite of all Sisyphus's raving exhortations and entreaties, not a single person offered to continue the attack.

Even Faithful Moggs stared aghast at the preparation, and muttering, 'Nay, master, for a man shall have his own head in a ditch a mile off ere he can lend the other's a crack,' would not stir a stump.

In short, ere the five given minutes were elapsed—or, indeed, half of them—the entire Bull Ring had become, in some strange and almost miraculous manner, deserted, and quit of all its noisy and threatening throngs.

Sisyphus himself, perceiving the danger he ran of being singled out as a sole mark for the indignation of his triumphant opposers, was reluctantly compelled at last to follow the general example.

But not completely solitary. His loving helpmate overtook him as he was turning into an obscure street out of the market-place, and ironically congratulated him on the events of the day.

'So you have saved what remains of you, Sissy, my dear,' she exclaimed. 'But you are not going to be King of Birmingham to-night ; and the armourer's pretty daughter is safe in St. Martin's Church still.'

'Begone, hag !' exclaimed the infuriate prophet, turning angrily upon her. 'I repudiate and divorce you at once and for ever from my bed and board, and henceforth hold you no more a wife of mine than Lot his wife when she became even as a pillar of salt.'

'Aye, aye, Sissy, dear. But your law is not yet law in Birmingham. And who will help you to your meals and stockings if you cast me off ? Will the armourer's beauteous daughter, whose lover has come so bravely on a visit to her now, and who doubtless means to carry her away with him ?'

'Ha, say you so ? I will rend him first piecemeal with this hook,' returned Sisyphus, whitening with rage. Yet, perceiving the danger of further irritating his vicious consort, he said retractingly, 'But this is one of the maddest of your jealousies, Meg ; and you would have acknowledged it so, if I could have made my way into the church. The traitress's head should have rolled upon a block, as comely as you deem it ; and you should have shown it yourself as such, an' it had pleased you, to the people. The people ! miserable dastards, to fly before the gleaming of a piece of metal in the sun. What would they have done had they been with me at the storming of Heidelberg, whence I so rightfully deserted to the enemy, and led them up the rocks to the assault ?'

CHAPTER LIX.

ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH.

MEANWHILE Edward Holte and Tubal exchanged a brief congratulation on their bloodless victory.

'This is wonderful, but most exactly as it should be, dear Tubal ! The mob taught manners, anarchy effectually quelled, and yet no man hurt in his own person or his friends to stir up a lasting animosity !' Edward exclaimed, warmly shaking the hero of the occasion by the hand.

'I am glad of it, too ; I would be as mild a neat-herd as the kind of cattle allows, in my rule ; and whatever the scholar's word you use, Master Holte, may mean, I am satisfied I have shown who is to be master in Birmingham awhile,' Tubal replied ; adding, with a smile, though with a slight quiver in his tones, 'You may tell the story in as choice language as it likes you, at Aston Hall ; and let Sir Thomas moreover know that he owes it to one whom he has little reason to count his friend, that Aston Hall still stands whole and sound. For had Captain Cromwell been aware of my possession of this artillery, he would have taken it into his own manage, and without doubt have tried what distance it would carry from the Park to his walls. At least before yonder Prince fellow and his dragoons arrived.'

'It is likely enough, and you turn out in all respects very different from anything as yet apprehended in you, either by friends or foes, Master Bromycham,' said Edward. 'Neither, in the long-run, do I deem the commonalty will owe you any grudge for standing between them and the pernicious counsels of the wretch who wants to establish himself as their leader. But be certain so determined a fellow as this bellows-blower will soon puff up a new flame of agitation ; perhaps against the peace we propose. I would have him expelled the town at once.'

'That is not so easy as crushing eggs, it fears me,' replied Tubal, 'so to speak, for I know not fear in any real conjunction with the handleless rogue. But he has established himself with a lot of his cut-purse renegades at the Parsonage House, several of them not ill-armed, and vows he will set it on fire and make the whole a desolation rather than surrender the post to any but the officer of the Parliament who he says gave it to his holding. We must see about that some other day ; but meanwhile it will be as well to lose no diligence in proceeding in your matter, Master Holte. Our town councillors can assemble and give their opinions now with no dread of a pelting, which some would allege as a pretence to keep away, and I will send a summons round among them to the Guildhall without further loss of time. It is the bailiff's business, but at present I have none. John Cooper would thankfully take office under me, but his wife, who is his master, will not have it so.'

'Meanwhile, then,' said Edward, eagerly, 'I may devote a few moments to seeing Mistress Firebrace, and assuring her of my unflinching love and fidelity. Said you not she is in the church ? Though I did not espy her there when the gates opened.'

'Have no fear,' said Tubal, smiling, 'you will find Dorothy safe within. Make use then of a short half hour, which will suffice me to bring the master armourer and other chief men to the meeting. But I disguise not that Firebrace himself is possessed with strange, and assuredly most undeserved, suspicions of your intentions towards his fair daughter; and is the worse content, very likely, that he cannot hint me into a jealously angry sharing of the same!'

Edward blushed with honest shame at the thought that he could mean anything but perfect good faith and honour towards his betrothed wife.

'My actions will always justify your confidence, never the armourer's suspicions. Yet I blame him not for his anxious care to fend off the possibility of evil from his child,' he said. 'Farewell awhile now, Master Bromycham, or rather Tubal, Lord of Birmingham, in all reality! I will strive not to exceed my leave, and will be with you at the best speed I can make.'

Edward now proceeded into the old church, hearing Tubal, as he did so, give general instructions to his men as to the watch and guard of the precincts, and a proper accompaniment of Master Holte to the intended assemblage of the chief citizens in New Street.

The mother church of Birmingham has little to boast of in the way of architecture. But in point of antiquity it rivals the oldest buildings in England, of which ought but ruins remain.

It is said to have been founded upwards of a thousand years ago; but the decay of so ancient a fabric rendering repairs necessary, the vandalism of the eighteenth century deprived St. Martin's of its great claim on veneration in most external respects. The crumbling stone walls were then encased in brickwork; the stained glass windows removed; the flooring, silently eloquent with records of the dead, repaved; and numerous time-defaced but interesting and solemn memorials of the past, in the shape of monuments and tablets, were cast, like the sweepings of a statuary's studio, to moulder in the vaults below the church.

In 1642 St. Martin's still preserved the aspect of its already great antiquity. The black, worm-eaten oak of benches, pulpit, and altar-piece was an appropriate furniture to the time-grey walls, and the ghostly tenantry of the statuary on the tombs, yellow and black with extreme age.

These monuments were chiefly of the Birmingham family, ancestors of Tubal, as were the principal parts of the coats of arms emblazoned in the window panes, which attested a long course of illustrious alliances and intermarriages of the race.

The most ancient county names figured among these: Astley, Someri, Seagrave, Peshall, Marmion, Wyrley, Freville, Fitzwarren, Montalt, Beauchamp, Latimer, Ferrers, and Townshend. The most ancient monument in the church, with a single exception—being the figure of a knight in complete armour, of the thirteenth century—was of a Birmingham who had figured in the wars of Edward I. And the exception was one so much worn and battered in the lapse of ages as only to present the mutilated trunk of a warrior in mail armour, lying under a canopy with armless hands crossed in devotion on the breast, and a

Latin inscription below, which had become illegible to any but antiquarian eyes.

Little of all this attracted Edward Holte's attention, whose eager glance sought a living lovely object of its own. But to his surprise, and perhaps alarm, he only perceived three persons present, all of whom he knew, and Dorothy Firebrace was not of the number.

These were the ex-Bailiff Cooper and his wife, and Mr. Lane.

The last was sitting on the pulpit stairs, propping his chin on his hands, and looking very pale and tremulous as if in apprehension of some great approaching disaster. And, indeed, his mud-bespattered clerical robe and general appearance denoted that he had already received rather unhandsome usage in his passage through the town on his embassy, doubtless from the Anabaptist mobsmen.

Bailiff Cooper had 'accepted the situation' in a very different manner. He had taken possession of the clerk's seat beneath the pulpit, where he had fallen asleep, and was snoring lustily; while his consort stared, wakeful as an old but still eager and hungry hawk in its aerie, from the pulpit itself above.

Hearing footsteps in the church, Mr. Lane craned his neck forward with evident anxiety, and no sooner perceived Edward than he quite sprang to meet him.

And yet his first words expressed rather sorrow than welcome at the arrival: 'How grieved I am you have ventured into this trampling and goring watering-place of the bulls of Bashan, my dear Edward!' he exclaimed. 'I was only waiting for nightfall to effect my own escape, and implored the young man who has set himself up in the captaincy of the town—and who, I do confess, laid about him like a flailer in my behalf—to warn you not to come among such a lawless multitude.'

'All is well, dear sir, and the rabble dispersed with the mere show of armed suppression. But where is Dorothy: where is Mistress Firebrace, I mean, who I was told was refuged with you here?' said Edward.

The agitation and eagerness of the query evidently communicated a somewhat similar emotion to the weakly-nerved and sympathetic old clergyman. Or else some feeling of his own, quieted awhile by personal apprehensions, revived to trouble him. Mr. Lane trembled all over as he answered, 'Nay, my dear Edward, never ask me! What do you want, what can you want, what ought you to want with the poor girl?'

'What has become of her, Mr. Lane? You alarm me. Where is Dorothy Firebrace, I repeat?' Edward replied, with an increase rather than diminution of his excitement.

'Dorothy Firebrace! He calls her *Dorothy Firebrace* thus familiarly! My fears are confirmed. O Edward, Edward Holte! dearest youth! this, then, is the unhappy girl whom your brother Richard has declared to be the object of your unlawful attachment in Birmingham, and for whose sake you run such hazards in the unruly town!' groaned Mr. Lane. 'But, alas! need I any other information than her own tearful questioning on your welfare, and her strange probings to ascertain how matters stood between you and the lady you have been so long betrothed to at Hagley?'

'What is all this you say? I ask you only where she is?' exclaimed Edward, now almost wild with impatience and apprehension.

'And I answer you—It must not, and it ought not to concern you, Master Holte! Consider who you are, and that Dorothy Firebrace never can be honourably yours; and pause ere you resolve to pursue the guidance of a cruel passion, which feigning to love and cherish, can but bring destruction and disgrace and utter misery on its hapless object!' the good clergyman continued remonstrating. 'Consider, also, dear boy! it is no common victim you propose yourself: that Dorothy Firebrace is the daughter of one of the wealthiest townsmen of Birmingham, although he has unhappily allowed himself to be hustled into treason and rebellion by the crowding madness of the times! That, although exercising now a mechanical trade, her family descends from a nobler race than yours, as the most ancient monument in this church—yonder it is, the tomb of Audomar Ferre-bras, Knight of the most Holy Order of the Temple, an exile by tyranny, but descended from an illustrious ancestry in France—her ancestor, attests! And that, to crown all, poor Dorothy is a girl as bravely-hearted as she is beautiful, who has saved your life, and who—who—who is the daughter of a woman whom I loved in my own youth! Vainly, indeed, since she preferred (and justly) a famous armourer of Birmingham to a poor chaplain and dependent on a proud master! yet for whose memory's sake do I, and shall I ever, live wifeless and childless to my grave!'

In the earnestness of the plea thus made, Mr. Lane actually clasped his hands, and crouched his limbs almost as if kneeling to Edward Holte.

The latter was moved by what he heard, but still more irritated.

'Good heavens, Mr. Lane!' he exclaimed, 'what has put it into your head that I design any harm to the maiden? Have I as foul a reputation with regard to women as the lying traitor who spreads his falsehoods everywhere concerning his brother and a young girl, who is as pure as snow newly fallen, and towards whom I declare to you, by all that is holy, I mean nothing but honour and—and—*gratitude*—if you will call it so!'

'In that case, Master Holte,' Dame Cooper now observed, with becoming solemnity, from her exalted seat, 'I take upon me to inform you, Mistress Dorothy has gone up the belfry stairs, to spy from an opening there is in the steeple how things are going on at the Bull Ring. The moment she heard you were expected in the town, and distinguished the noise and swaying of the people outside awhile ago, she was no longer to be restrained, though she had on one of her better—more kirtles, and it is as dusty and narrow as a chimney to the roof.'

But ere this explanation was half concluded, Edward was searching round for the means of access to the upper regions alluded to; and spying a narrow door open in the wall, he darted towards it, and found indeed a winding flight of stairs, almost as close and steep as a corkscrew, comparatively speaking, but which he did not a moment hesitate to ascend.

CHAPTER LX.

THE CLANDESTINE MARRIAGE.

THE spiral passage terminated in a chamber in which hung a peal of twelve bells, celebrated in the town for their melodious cadences. And here Edward expected to find his Dorothy. But her non-appearance, and an open window in the front, satisfied him that in her eagerness to obtain a view of the proceedings in the market-place, she had ventured out on the shelving roof of the church.

Now, as this was only protected at the time by a low gutter without parapet at the edges, the notion greatly alarmed him. And not without reason; for on looking out he perceived Dorothy lying on the sloping tiles, clutching fearfully at them, and seemingly afraid to make any movement to extricate herself from her dangerous and uncomfortable position! She had overlooked every personal consideration in her eagerness to observe what fortune to her lover, in the angrily excited scene below; but found it by no means so easy to retrace her way, when the impulse of a more powerful actuating motive than even self-preservation ceased to exercise its influence on her mind.

Edward was exceedingly alarmed lest his sudden approach should startle her and produce some catastrophe; and yet he perceived that assistance was required without delay. He therefore said not a word, but jumped from the window, and placing himself astraddle on the arch of the roof, clutched his too rashly-devoted betrothed in a strenuous grasp, almost before she was aware of any one's approach.

'Fear not now, dearest! Draw yourself up; Edward Holte's strong hand is upon you!'

And Dorothy indeed feared no longer then. In a few moments she was safely beside her lover on the coping of the roof, in a few more moments safely supported by him into the belfry, and then, falling into his embrace, she swooned away.

'I saw you enter the church, dearest,' she murmured first, 'and only then felt on what a giddy shelving I had placed myself, when I strove to return to welcome you. Alas, thus!'

Edward essayed the few remedies in his power, knowing that it would be in vain to summon aid in their present elevation.

He had, luckily, a hunting-flask of wine in his pocket, and applying this to Dorothy's pale lips, and chafing her temples and hands, he had soon the satisfaction of seeing her revive. But doubtless, had this nervous crisis overtaken her in her recent perilous position, great risk of a fatal catastrophe would have been incurred.

We need not chronicle the first five minutes of the lovers' ecstasy, thus restored to each other. In fact, there would be little to be recorded save sighs, and tears, and kisses, numberless passionate pressings to each other's hearts, wild repetitions of each other's names, coupled with every imaginable endearing epithet, and then the whole fond delirium over again.

Dorothy was the first who recovered some degree of self-possession.

'It is enough, dearest,' she said. 'We cannot doubt each other's

love ; but oh, if there were any witnesses, would not this meeting too much support the falsehoods of my enemies ? Nay, what is harder still to be borne, the sad surmises of my poor father, in whose every word and look, since the night of our parting, I read suspicions that trouble my inmost soul. But what have you done for us at Nottingham with the King ? Have we secured a royal patron there, at all events, to our persecuted love, at the cost of almost every other friendliness ?

Edward was a good deal embarrassed with this question ; but it was necessary to confess and explain his failure, as it might well be considered, to the expectant maiden.

He did so as briefly as he could, and endeavouring to put the most favourable gloss on the King's demeanour towards himself on the occasion compatible with the inevitable truth.

Dorothy listened with an expression of intense disappointment.

'An unkingly King,' she murmured, 'that measures out his gratitude as a pedlar his tapes, by the ell-wand for a penny ! Those who serve such princes do so of their own loyalty alone. And the traitor Grim-sorwe to have so completely circumvented you ! But who could be prepared for the glide and subtlety of the serpent in man's outward upright form ? I blame you not, my Edward ; it was a deceit past calculation. But the hopes you hold out in Charles's gratitude appear to me little more than the fleeting promise of a rainbow on the skirts of a tempest coming up fast on the wind.'

'You are indeed in great danger, dearest, in this town, from much besides your father's silent disapproval,' said Edward, mournfully. 'A portion of the mob demand your fair head as that of an enemy to their rebellious will and purposes. The Parliament's representative here, now Captain Cromwell is gone, requires that you should be sent a prisoner before prejudiced and merciless judges in London. Tubal Bromycham, who has so courageously protected you hitherto, may not always be on the alert, or have the means in readiness. Who can tell what may be the progress of the war, or which party may rise to complete ascendancy in the town ? For all these reasons, dearest Dorothy, I implore you do not hesitate to comply with the earnest entreaty I make you, and leave Birmingham at once for some place of safety and quiet, where my love may constantly watch over your comfort and security.'

A blush, like a flame of fire, burst on Dorothy's cheeks as she listened to these words, and seemed to redden up even in her brilliantly excited eyes.

'What mean you by this proposal, Master Holte ?' she exclaimed, with sudden passionate vivacity. 'That I should do all that in me lies to establish for truth your dastardly brother's perjuries, and bring my father's grey hairs with sorrow to the grave ? Nay, to myself become the thing I most abhor, a shamed and shameful daughter of a name which, let me tell you, is emblazoned noble on tombs more ancient than any Holtes in Aston or Erdington. No ; rather may the wild beast Sisyphus rend me with his single talon, and fling me in shreds to the cannibals of his faction to devour ; or the Londoners make a holiday to see my head roll on a scaffold on Tower Hill !'

Edward gazed with admiring despair at the beautiful, excited speaker,

as she thus uttered a resolve so noble and true to her pure, and generous, and heroic nature, but which so evidently increased the dangers of the position.

He could perceive but one means of extrication, to which the passion which had taken possession of all the strongest energies of his being also irresistibly impelled.

‘Not so, not so, my own Dorothy, my dearest all! Whatever ruin may come of it—whatever engine to my destruction it may put in the devilish Grimsorwe’s grasp with my father, I ask you only to leave your father’s house, and this raving town, as the known and declared *wife* of Edward Holte.’

Dorothy’s indignant expression vanished on the utterance of the beautiful and sacred word which alone consecrates and exalts the destiny of woman on the earth. More, it changed entirely into one of the most adoring and ecstatic tenderness; and snatching Edward’s hand in both hers to her bosom, tears burst in showers of diamonds on her lovely cheeks.

‘Dearest, faithfullest, most generous of men and lovers!’ she exclaimed, ‘forgive the doubt, the selfishness, the fears, my demands must seem to imply. But if I lose thee, dear, most dear Edward, I lose the whole happiness of my existence; and what is existence without happiness? To eat, to drink, to sleep—who cares to live for these alone? And yonder kind and worthy, though too faintly-hearted chaplain of Aston Hall, who recognised me with tears as the child of a woman whom he had himself loved in long bygone years, warned me of your betrothal to another, of your father’s inflexible will, and of how immediately he had determined on the completion of the contract between you and the Lady Penelope Lyttelton.’

‘So he denounces, dearest; but I have always told you it is hopeless to think to obtain my father’s consent to our union. In all probability he will be irritated even to the extent of totally disinheriting me. So he has threatened me, if I dared dream of disobedience to his will in this respect. Grimsorwe, whose plots you have yourself discovered are all laid to supersede me, will be at hand to feed the flame. But what matters all this? I shall have my sword still, and the woman I adore; and so guerdoned will accept smilingly whatever the envy and malice of fate can do in all other forms to mischief me!’

Dorothy looked yearningly in her lover’s noble and manly visage, instinct with the brightness of fidelity and love and honour towards herself and her whole sex, as it were, in the chivalrous candour of his devotion to one. And her tears fell faster yet as she resumed utterance, in reply to that outburst of generous assurance.

‘Dear life!’ she sobbed, ‘but can we not find some means to baffle the hatred and malice of our enemies—the cruel prejudices of those who yet love us well—without giving ourselves up for immolation, bound hand and foot? A *private marriage*, my own Edward! A private marriage between us meets every objection—removes every cause for dissatisfaction and fear—in all respects save my poor father’s headstrong wish to have me wedded to Tubal, and so removed out of the peril he so much and so causelessly dreads for his child!’

'A private marriage! And you will accompany me, then, to Sutton, where for awhile I am banished from Aston to reside!' exclaimed Edward, with the eager assent and hopefulness of youthful passion to such a proposition.

Dorothy's splendid blush again reappeared, but of a softer carnation, glowing all over her beauteous frame.

'But how were it then, dear Edward,' she said, gently withdrawing from his claspings arms, 'with your wife's fair fame in men's eyes, and my father's dreads? No future declaration could ever clear my renown from the blurts that would come upon it, or—if God should so bless us—secure our children's true birth and legitimacy from cavil and sneer! My noblest Edward, no! I would have you put all my doubts and fears to rest by marrying me. But I would remain in my father's house, unblamed by him and others, until—until circumstances might enable—might compel us—to divulge our union. And meanwhile, dear husband of my soul and heart, do not fear but that—but that—we shall find place and occasion to meet and—and assure each other of our everlasting love and constancy.'

There was a dove-like, billing intimation of tenderness and bliss in these latter words, which would have overborne far stronger scruples of worldly interest and prudence than ever found an abiding in the breast of Edward Holte. But, in truth, the scheme bore a great appearance of reconciling the whole contradiction of feelings and motives that might have influenced soberer calculators than two young lovers in such a crisis of their passion's fate.

If Edward could not make himself altogether blind to objections, he certainly uttered none.

'All shall be as you have said, my sweetest!' he exclaimed, once more folding his bride-elect in his fond embrace. 'Come the worst, then, you can flee to a husband's protection at any time at Sutton Manor-House. He will not shut the door upon you, depend, who would open his very heart to receive you, if need were. Thus shall we elude our father's suspicions and injustice, baffle the bastard traitor's intrigues and malice of suggestion in all shapes, and obtain time to improve what favour our duties may have acquired with the King by some braver service of my sword in his cause. Nothing is necessary but an inviolate secrecy, which I know your love for me will well preserve. I have sworn to marry you, and an oath in heaven should be kept as speedily as possible on earth. Grimsorwe's calumnies will thus but have worked to his own harming and my perfect happiness, whom he would so fain have consigned to misery and ruin. Here is my hand in solemn plight, Dorothy Firebrace. Accept it, and it is for ever yours!'

'I do, dear love, I do! Take all I am in return, and at the same time my promise to God of inviolable secrecy until you yourself shall resolve and will to blazon our marriage to the world,' said Dorothy, profoundly affected at the generous devotion of her young lover. 'Neither to father, or family, or to friends—for love, or fear, or foolish vanity—will I ever forget that your ruin or prosperity hang on the faithful observance of my word. No extremity, of whatsoever kind, shall ever subdue me to the breach, though all the world were clamorous round

me to divulge, and every form of grief and suffering circled me in with the true secrecy.'

'It needs no such oath, my beloved girl! What more is needed now? Only a clergyman to receive our vows. We are in an inclosure dedicated to such hallowed purposes,' said Edward Holte.

'There is a clergyman provided also below, or was erewhile. The Reverend Mr. Lane will bestow the Church's benediction on us, Edward, if he is still under this roof.'

'The Reverend Mr. Lane, my Dorothy! You are ignorant, then, how timorous he is by nature—in what awe he stands of my father's displeasure,' sighed the purposed bridegroom, as if resigning any hope in the direction indicated.

'I am not ignorant of aught of this, dearest,' Dorothy replied. 'But I know also—for his emotion was too sincere and overpowering on recognising me not to reveal the fact—that this good clergyman loved my mother in his youth. Mr. Lane, believe me, has all the kindness and pitifulness of a woman, with the weak fears of one. Leave it to me. I will prevail upon him, doubt not, to utter the words which will for ever rescue the child of the woman he loved from the fate he dreads for her. The witness we should need is also provided in the person of Dame Alice Cooper, who is a woman whose secrecy may be depended upon if any woman's may. She most certainly dislikes Tubal Bromycham for displacing her husband, and will think you out-rival him by marrying me. And besides, she is about to retire in disgust from Birmingham to her native town of Stratford-on-Avon.'

'Be it so,' said Edward Holte. 'Let us descend into the church: we will not care for the snorer in the clerk's pulpit.'

We need not detail at length the consternation of Mr. Lane on the first divulging of the projected union to him, his first refusals to have anything to do in the matter, his affrighted representations of Sir Thomas Holte's certain wrath and chastisement of so great an act of disobedience on the part of his son, and abetting in the revolt on his own. Dorothy had calculated, with a true womanly instinct, on her means of overcoming this repugnance of fear, when emotions of such strength could be looked to, to influence on the contrary side. Above all, when she could appeal to the memory of that 'fond, foolish' past, if the reader will so consider it, which attached Mr. Lane, by a shadowy and mournful, but very loving species of paternity, to herself—a memory suddenly revived, as it were, from the grave, in her strong and now matured resemblance to her departed mother, the gentle clergyman's love of youth.

Edward added his entreaties to his friend: his assurances that only more risk of discovery would be incurred by their being obliged to have recourse to another clergyman, as he was resolved nothing should hinder him from fulfilling his agreement with his betrothed.

Dame Cooper, who had been taken into the confidence, and who highly relished the whole romantic plan, which she declared (rather ominously) resembled to a nicety the stolen marriage of Romeo and Juliet, in her 'dear Willie Shakespeare's play,' joined her exhortations to Mr. Lane to fulfil his duty as a clergyman in making lawful the loves

of two young creatures, whom Nature herself had so evidently marked out as a pair.

The poor man yielded at last, though with infinite fear and trembling, vanquished by Dorothy's tears rather than any argument; but not until he had made all the parties to the act join in a solemn oath, upon the Bible, never to reveal the secret to any other human being but by one another's consent and allowance.

Mr. Lane hoped in this way to secure himself time for effecting a retreat from Sir Thomas Holte's resentment, should the discovery of his son's prodigious act of disobedience take place. He then finally consented to officiate in the rite, in his clerical capacity; and in a very, very brief period the words were said that cannot be unsaid, the vows were exchanged which only death could release, the whole solemn consecration of one man to one woman in marriage was gone through between the armourer's daughter and the heir of Aston Hall!

Dame Cooper's friendly zeal supplied the wedding ring from her own finger; and, if this alone were not unlucky enough, it was certainly no happy omen that, being too large, it dropped from the bride's finger as she knelt beside her newly-made husband to receive the final benediction. And the chink of the falling symbol on the stones, slight as it was, after the day's turmoil which he had overslept, like the last straw which breaks the camel's back, woke up ex-Bailiff Cooper in his snuggery. But before he could rub his eyes awake, and stare out astonishment, the rite was concluded; and the worthy could ever after acquiesce with a good conscience in his wife's assurances that he had not seen what he saw, but had awakened from a debauch of perry and ale, in which he had indulged to drown care, to *fancy* he beheld Mistress Firebrace and Edward Holte kneeling as bride and bridegroom, with clasped hands, before a white-haired, quivering priest at the altar's rails!

No argument, however, could ever persuade John Cooper that he did not perceive Edward Holte bestow a kiss on the fair forehead of Dorothy Firebrace as they arose. But he was left immediately after to his own conjectures, the whole group receding into the vestry of the church, where there was an ink-standish for the general purposes of the building; and where Mr. Lane, with a great increase of trepidation, so that he could hardly write, delivered to Dorothy a full attestation of her marriage, which was duly signed by all concerned.

Of course it was not ventured to make any formal entry in the parish books, though the keys of the chest which contained them hung up over the dispossessed rector's surplice plainly enough. But it furnished a remarkable piece of future evidence, that having no other paper on which to write, a strip of parchment was torn by Edward for the purpose from a very ancient and, of course, disused mass-book of the Catholic times, which Dr. Dugdale had, nevertheless, taken considerable pains to refurbish and cleanse from its dust of centuries, and had left conspicuously visible on a side-table of the office.

Scarcely was this momentous business thus far concluded, when William Moorcroft, Tubal's most trusted subordinate, made his entrance into the vestry, with the announcement that Master Holte was waited for at the Guildhall.

Moorcroft was not a man of very rapid or acute observation, and probably he explained the scene before him to himself on some notion that the fugitives had taken refuge as remotely out of danger of observation as possible, and had there been found by their visitor. At all events he showed no signs of being struck by anything unusual in what he witnessed, and made no remark whatever in relation to it.

Edward, however, thought it best to comply at once with the summons; and, only whispering some few words to Dorothy, which brightened her face with 'celestial rosy red, love's proper hue,' he declared he would return as speedily as possible to *escort Mr. Lane out of the church and town*, and withdrew with his guide.

CHAPTER LXI.

OPPOSITES ALIKE.

THE Guildhall of Birmingham was a structure of very different appearance and proportions from the stately imitation of classical architecture dedicated to the uses of a town-house in the modern Athens of Industry. It was a very ancient Gothic building, chiefly of woodwork, with two projecting wings, and a central chamber of considerable extent under a low lantern-tower, where the rulers of the town—the burgesses and worthy men thereof—met to decide on most matters of internal government. In what specially concerned the Lord and his claims and dues, an annual court was held at the Moat House, now occupied in that capacity by Tubal Bromycham.

To this ancient Guildhall Edward directed his steps, under escort, though the latter precaution seemed scarcely any longer necessary. Sisyphus and his adherents had in a manner drained themselves out of the streets, and were believed to have retired to hold one of their private conclaves in Bordesley. The rest of the population, either overawed by the recent display of determination and means of carrying out repression, or favourable to a return of peace and quiet, offered no species of obstruction or insult to the progress of the messenger of peace.

In the inclosure before the Guildhall, however, Edward was suddenly overtaken and detained by Tubal, who came from the direction of Digbeth. He reached at the cavalier's taller shoulder with his long arm, and abruptly stopped him.

Turning, Edward saw that he was looking flushed and disconcerted in a very unusual degree with him.

This was soon explained.

'What obstinate fools old men become!' Tubal passionately exclaimed to his fellow young man. 'Here is Greybeard Firebrace knotted himself up against all reason, and vowing to oppose every motion of peace in the council unless I will promise immediately, and without a day's further delay, to wed me to his daughter. In self-defence, and not to grate unkindly on the old man's pride, I have been obliged to tell him that it is Dorothy who refuses any longer to accept me as her husband,

and to remind him that she has shown a most evident preference for you. Upon which he has worked himself into a ferment of discontent and upbraiding, reproaching me that I was wilfully throwing his child over to the licentious wooing of a stranger; that my pride had risen, like a bubble in boiling lead, with my foolish pretensions to lordship and mastery in the turbulent town; and accused me that I am mad enough to fancy myself a likely match for the proudest lady of her station in the world, and who disdained me most—Arabella Holte! He touched me there rather on the raw—how he knows it I know not; and I answered him, perchance, too sharply and peevishly, for thereupon he grew angrier than ever, and declared that his daughter's honour and safety were, at all events, sufficiently dear to himself to make him resolve to persevere as much as in him lies against any terms likely to restore the old free resort and association between Aston Hall and the town. And in this mood, and with these purposes, there is much reason to fear he is coming to oppose our plans with all the weight of his position and influence.'

Edward was exceedingly annoyed at this statement, which seemed likely to act very injuriously to his political objects, and consequently his best private hopes. It struck him, however, that some prospect of evasion of the difficulty was offered in an idea that occurred to him. He asked Tubal accordingly to bring him, if possible, into an interview with the master armourer in private, before the business on which he came was discussed. And although Tubal plainly expressed himself of opinion that no good results could follow, in consequence of the armourer's exasperated state of feeling towards him as a person who designed dishonourable dealings with his only child, he persisted in the wish until the younger chief of the town promised at all events to exert his endeavours to effect the desired meeting.

While they were yet speaking, passed by several grave and dubiously-staring personages into the council-room, and Firebrace himself then appeared, stalking gloomily across the cobble-stoned yard before the Guildhall.

The grim austerity of the Puritan citizen's habitual look and manner was certainly in nowise diminished by recent events. And though Edward Holte respectfully bared his head as he approached, and Tubal crossed his way with a request for attention, it seemed likely enough the master armourer intended to push on without notice. He almost violently thrust the young smith aside, or else himself in the effort, and muttering 'I hold no private converse with the enemies of the town and Parliament!' was with difficulty brought to a stand by Edward Holte's directly facing him.

The firm though very respectful address of the young cavalier, and some apprehension, possibly, that a public wrangle might contribute to spread the scandals against his daughter, compelled Firebrace, much against his will, to a pause. When finding it could not be avoided, he assented to the earnest request made to him by Edward for a few moments' private hearing on a point of importance to be settled with the master armourer before the public proceedings took place.

He stepped aside, sternly bidding Master Holte follow him, into a

small and darksome chamber in a species of watch-room at the entrance of the great hall, the solitary tenant of which was the figure of a giant, in Roman armour, cut in wood and garishly coloured, like the London Gog or Magog. This was supposed to represent St. Martin, the patron saint of Birmingham, and having fallen from an ancient niche over the entrance of the Guildhall, had been stowed aside as old lumber here.

By no means with any conciliation in his tones the master armourer then turned to Edward, and, with averted eyes, demanded his pleasure in delaying him from the town's business, whereupon he was come.

Edward had made up his mind what to do and say, to remove, as far as he should find it safe, the worst personal prejudices of the father of Dorothy Firebrace against him : at least, he fancied he was adopting the best means to this end. He replied, therefore, very gently to the armourer, by confessing that after recent occurrences, unless properly explained, he had a right to be suspicious of his own presence and purposes in Birmingham.

'But,' Edward continued, with kindly warmth, 'your misgivings are altogether unfounded, Master Firebrace ; and it is as an honourable suitor for your daughter's hand in marriage that I presume now to ask you to change your angry looks at me, and know me for a true and honest friend, which I shall always prove. Your daughter's heart is already mine, and her faith plighted mine by links of love that bind firmer than adamant. All that is necessary is that we should keep this happy arrangement and alliance a secret from my father awhile, as he is violently set on another match for me, and with whom I have bitter enemies, who may use his wrath against me in the disobedience to utter casting down and ruin.'

While he thus spoke, Edward, who had expected that all obstacles would melt like snow before this genial sunshine, was dismayed to observe the deepening frown on the master armourer's brows. Neither was the tempest long in bursting.

'What have I done, O Lord, that I am become as a mockery and a derision among the Gentiles, and to my own people likewise?' exclaimed old Firebrace, glaring reproachfully rather than imploringly upward, and tossing back his long grizzly locks. 'Or am I some other fulsome boy, licking up treacle poured forth to catch flies? Or who do you think myself I am, my fair master, that I should seek to thrust my daughter by stealth into a family where I have no mind she should wed, and who scorn and repudiate the alliance? I tell you, were your father and his house of the royallest in Europe, emperors and kings—know, Master Holte, I would not on such terms consent to let my daughter crawl up a throne ! And do you come to me to offer that on certain conditions of present dishonour, suspicion, and dislike among all my townsfolk and friends I am to put my daughter in the way some day to find herself the bride of a disinherited beggar, of birth not half so well-blooded, truly, as mine own ; but far likelier, with all this fair show, the shamed and cast-off leman and mistress of a father-scorning profligate? Go to, sir, trouble yourself to urge the matter no further ; for I swear to you on the faith of my living soul, were you to present yourself

to me as a son-in-law—fully consented by your haughty sire and all of his adherency—loaded with the favours of your King—with the lands and place of Aston to put in dower on your bride—I would answer as I do now, Woe worth the hour ! Judge, then, if I will suffer an address which must be offered in a robber-like pacing of concealment, and under penalties but little short of his branding-iron and every other felon-forfeiture.'

The effect of this reply upon the newly-made husband of Dorothy Firebrace may be much easier imagined than described.

He perceived at once that not only were the chances of conciliation and indulgence towards their loves utterly hopeless on his own proud father's part, but on that of the equally, though in different style, haughty Puritan sire of his bride.

Every word was pronounced with the stern emphasis of the strokes of the hammer on metal, compelled into some irresistible form by the art so familiar to the master armourer.

Edward felt that further remonstrance would but increase suspicion and multiply difficulties. He therefore resolved to attempt none ; and, with certainly a pardonable hypocrisy, replied, ' I must then deem your consent impossible to be obtained, and submit myself accordingly ;' and he himself opened the door for Firebrace to retire.

The master armourer would not, however, accept this mark of deference.

' Age counts not against honour as yet in England, Master Holte,' he said, stepping himself rigidly back. ' Take the way before me, which is the due of the heir of Aston Hall ; but you will not be followed by a second of the proposal you come to entrap us withal from the King !'

' As you will, Master Armourer,' returned Edward, really now feeling himself wax angrily indignant at the persevering repulse and hostility of the stern old man. ' But I trust I shall find some out-numbering of reasonable men in your council, who will rather serve the interests of the town and themselves than the causeless animosities even of so chief a ruler in Birmingham as your office, I deny not, should make you, were it more evenly balanced by judgment and temper, to profitable issues for those ruled.'

And he took the precedence so scornfully urged upon him with a very fairly provoked vehemence of gesture and glance.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE TOWN COUNCIL.

IRRITATED quite as much as discouraged by what had taken place between himself and his unconscious father-in-law, Edward proceeded into the Guildhall Council Chamber without deigning once again to look back.

It was a handsome apartment, particularly on account of its loftiness, the roof being open to the top of the lantern-tower. About a score of the principal burgesses, chiefs of the several trades, were present, for

the most part looking considerably scared and puzzled, but wringing hands at every turn with Tubal Bromycham, and forming into little knots to hear what he said. And he seemed very busy saying something in his curt and straightforward way ; probably explaining the object of the meeting.

Among these groups was specially noticeable a small, thin man, with a sharp and wizened, roguishly keen, indeed, and intelligent visage, and who seemed eagerly bent on acquiring all the information he could.

This personage was known to the general body of his townspeople as Johny-the-Rogue, his proper name being John Sainsfoy ; and he was a master-smith, who could turn his craft to as various uses as Firebrace himself, with the difference that he prided himself on overreaching all who dealt with him, either in material or manufacture, and in this discreditable manner had acquired his by-name.

Johny-the-Rogue was notoriously reputed to cherish a bitter ill-will against Firebrace and Tubal, whose handiwork so far exceeded his own in other qualities as well as honesty of metal and fidelity to contract in the fashioning. His son, who resembled him as a weasel does a fox, was said to have aspired to rival Tubal with the master armourer's daughter ; of course, with anything but good success. Rivals in trade the two forge-owners had ever been. But all this did not prevent Johny-the-Rogue from addressing Tubal in a very soft and cringing manner, as he came on with his explanations, congratulating him greatly on his success in putting down the mutinous movement of the populace in the forenoon.

'These are troublous times, troublous times, Master Bromycham ; but you are the man born to sway them. For my part, I should never have ventured out of my smithy smoke to-day had I not heard with what a high hand you swung the rabble back into their holes again by their tails. Not a rat among them will squeak for a month again. And so also there are good tidings of a peace forward, are there, God be praised ?'

Tubal knew that this man would be sure to back terms of peace if they also promised profit, and he endeavoured to respond to Johny-the-Rogue's questionings as conscientiously to the purpose as he could ; and he was thus engaged when Edward Holte entered the room, followed, at some interval, by the slow and brooding steps of the master armourer.

Tubal, probably tired of the unaccustomed part he was playing, immediately took advantage of the arrival to break off his conference with the sly and insidious old man, and begin the business of the meeting.

'I am no speechifier,' he said, abruptly addressing the good company, but in those tones that always commanded the remotest attention, and made his whispering neighbour start. 'What I have to say, I mostly say with my right hand and arm. But there is Master Edward Holte come to you, my masters, from the King, and he will tell you why himself.'

Edward took the hint : and animated now by so many additional motives to complete the task he had assigned himself, addressed the burgesses, as they were then styled—not town councillors—of Birmingham, in a still apter and more earnestly persuasive harangue than had

previously proved so effective, for a time, with the general assemblage of the townspeople.

He began by giving the King much more credit than he deserved, for an anxious wish to prevent the seemingly now inevitable calamities of a civil war; at all events, to narrow to as definite and few issues as possible the decisions put to the unreasoning arbitration of the sword, and to confine, as far as possible, the theatre of misery and bloodshed.

The matters in dispute between the King and Parliament, according to the young Royalist orator, were now in reality reduced to this one—which of them should wield the executive power of the state, which for all the known times of England had been confided to the sovereign.

The King had granted every demand made upon him that could possibly tend to the security of the liberties and religion of his people. He had surrendered his dearest friends, and the faithfullest servants of his will in his former way of government, to the utmost fury and vengeance of the factions opposed to it; to public and national justice, if it so pleased them of Birmingham to consider it, as no doubt many wise and honourable men, and true subjects in their hearts, might hold it, and did. The noble Strafford had poured forth his loyal and generous blood—whose purple was richer than the robe of the empire he perished, as it were, by his own consent to preserve—on the scaffold. Laud, the archbishop, was in a dungeon of the Tower, expiating the severities and oppressions of a too harsh, however well meant, zeal in the establishment of church influence and domination, which he doubtless founded in his own pure and virtuous mind and purposes with religion and the supreme sway and enhancement of morality. But not contented with all or anything of this, the Parliament insisted on sequestering the whole kingly authority and rightful prerogatives of the crown into its own hands, and of thus establishing a worse than Venetian oligarchical tyranny, with a more phantom Doge still at its head, in the realm and constitution of England, which of all time had been royal and free.

The question of the militia, of the direction and control of the public sword, was that upon which alone the King remained firmly and inexorably resolved never to yield to the tyrannous spoliation attempted to be made of his rights. And upon that it was, and which was relied upon as the supreme effort to reduce himself and his people to so miserable a slavery, that the Parliament had prompted and abetted the most furious and insolent seditions and violences against his Majesty and his royal family, and had finally driven him away from the proper capital seat of his government and state.

London, in fact, the well-spoken Royalist proceeded to declare, was the real and main offender in the whole affair, and the sole reliable support and abetment of the Parliament in its unjust and traitorous designs. It was on London, therefore, alone that the King's indignation would most reasonably and properly be directed. His Majesty deprecated nothing more than the multiplication of obstacles in his way, and the necessity of inflicting chastisement on towns and cities in their hearts faithful to him, though in some instances either shamefully coerced or led astray from their duties, as Birmingham had of late become.

True representations had, however, been made to the King by some honest gentlemen, their friends, of the real state of affairs there; how the good town had been for awhile transported and driven out of its accustomed moderation in opinion, and attention to its own industrious pursuits, by the sudden outloosing of a tempest-blast of fanaticism, and the violent control of a military force. But now both had ceased of their tumultuous and unlawful influence, and though the surface of the popular wave was still something ruffled and tossed, it was only froth and foam that showed above the calming billows now. They were quit of the armed oppression lately exercised among them, and the proper authority of their lord and the worthy burgesses of Birmingham had been duly and most efficaciously restored. They were free then now—as they must all have heard, within so brief an interval—to exercise their own will and judgment truly in the affair, and decide whether they would return to the quiet and peaceful exercise of their trades and occupations, which promised to become more profitable than ever, under his Majesty's full protection and pardon, or expose themselves to all the inconveniences and ravages of war, already close at their doors, in the hardly-restrained exasperation of the King's cavalry at Aston, and certainly very speedily to present itself in overwhelming power and vengeance, in the shape of a royal army marching on London from the north and west, well provided, by the Queen's diligence, with artillery and other means of destruction, whereby their town might be laid level with the dust at the least word of a bidding, whose utterance it might no longer be possible to entreat refraining.

What could Birmingham, whatever her spirit and courage, an un-walled and unfortified town, do against so formidable an advance, supposing her citizens so madly set against their own interests and preservation as to persist in the seditious movement effected by the artifices and violence of an intriguing stranger? And it was plain that Birmingham, having been led or drawn into so dangerous a strait, had been deserted to her fate by the Parliament, which had withdrawn its one scanty troop of horse, and need not look to their distant London army for assistance of any sort.

Supposing even that a most unlikely chance of victory on the part of the London cockneys and frenzied fanatics over well-born gentlemen accustomed to arms, and their hardy tenantry, ensued, the royal army would first have marched through their county, and inflicted whatever justice or vengeance might be decreed. And Edward Holte very truly assured the meeting that there was a strong disposition among many of the trusted councillors and favourite advisers of the King to inflict some memorable chastisement on a town which, destitute of the means of defence, had cast itself with such fury and violence into rebellion, and set so bad an example to others in the like predicament.

It was for them, therefore—the chief men and masters of the town of Birmingham—to resolve upon its fate, which the orator now committed, in the King's name, to their deliberation, on terms that, with their kind permission, he would proceed to disclose.

The reader is already aware of the nature of the conditions which the King affixed to a full and gracious pardon, and receiving back into his

protection' of his good town of Birmingham, and which indeed were most indulgent and ample, had they been sincerely meant.

All that seemed required was that the town should professedly return to its allegiance, open itself to all lawful egress and regress, and engage to allow of the furnishing of the King's armies freely for their money, with the warlike implements and engines that formed an established portion of its manufacture.

In confirmation of all which Edward produced his credentials, and the conditional formula of pardon, duly signed and sealed, and requiring only acceptance on the part of the people of Birmingham.

This speech was listened to with great, though, for the most part, silent attention, thus far; not, however, without an occasional murmur of assent and approbation. But men seemed more intent on watching the effect on their neighbours than in giving utterance to their own conclusions. Yet it was plain enough the general result was favourable, and particularly the last part of the stipulations seemed agreeable to the taste of Johny-the-Rogue.

'I was always for a fair and open trade with all customers myself,' he remarked, 'and no questions asked, but that the payment should not be in King James's clipped money, come by whose hands it might. Yet I am but the deacon of our craft, and the master armourer decided otherwise.'

'Still, of a surety, father, it something marvels me,' squeaked out the falsetto tones of the younger Sainsfoy, known as 'the Weasel,' 'how the town can return to its allegiance without receiving back into his authority the Crown Bailiff, Master Cooper, which methinks Master Bromycham here, who sets up for proper Lord of Birmingham, will by no means allow.'

'My interests shall not stand in the way of the town's, Wynkyr Sainsfoy,' replied Tubal, cheerfully. 'If Cooper will accept the office again, he may hold it under me by what authority he pleases, until the King shall be put in full and true possession of the rights of my case by Master Holte, when I shall as certainly expect justice from his royal hands as from any mob of upsetters in the world.'

'Ay, ay! kings are greatly changed in our time from what they were in your great grandfather's, when he was (so unjustly, as you say) condemned to gibbeting and forfeiture as a highway robber.'

Tubal was about to make some angry reply to this sarcasm on the part of his despised rival, Wynkyn Sainsfoy, when he was cut short by the sharp and vindictive utterance of the master armourer, who suddenly exclaimed, 'Say'st so? How are kings changed? Only by adding worse perjuries and beguilings, they and their satellites, to their old violence and tyranny, which well this bedazed young man will learn to know.' And, to the great surprise and unfixing of the opinion of the meeting, whose members always expected to see the master armourer and his intended son-in-law of one mind, he rose, and pronounced what in its way was a most singularly virulent and passionate but effective counterpoise to most of the arguments towards the restoration of peace, and acceptance of the conditions proposed from Nottingham, brought forward by Edward Holte.

Firebrace was very well known in his town for the Puritan tendency of his religious opinions, and the warmth and earnestness with which he had from the first supported the general movement of the Parliament and nation in that direction ; but no one suspected his political opinions had attained to so deep and violent a cast of republican repudiation and hatred for the established forms of government and authority which his present outburst betrayed. Nor had it hitherto appeared that he had been so convinced and zealous an agent in the late revolt as his now open profession of absolute and unswerving devotion to the cause of the Parliament implied.

Indeed his considerably broken and confused forms of expression declared no slight internal dislocation and disarrangement of ideas, and greatly added to the puzzle of the auditory, among whom he had the reputation of a concise and unwinning, but clear-minded speaker, on the few subjects of a mundane nature he deemed worthy his attention.

Above all, there was no mistaking the personal animus and exasperation of the master armourer's tone ; and not alone against the terms of peace themselves, but their offerer.

He adopted with the utmost virulence all the arguments in popular use against the possibility of placing any kind of confidence in the King's promises, and reluctant relinquishment of the tyrannical form of government he had maintained so long, until the necessities resulting from his maladministration compelled him to resort to a parliament for support.

Nothing, he maintained, but Charles's surrender of the power of the sword could furnish his unhappy people with any security against his grasping spirit of despotism, and visible reversion to most of the superstitions and observances of Popery to please a Popish wife.

The Londoners were most nobly and righteously engaged in this just cause, he declared, in support of the Parliament, and Birmingham had bravely and fittingly thrown in her weight on the side of the religion and freedom of the people of England. And were they now about to exhibit themselves as a pack of headlong children, following the suggestion of any leader for the moment, and then running wild with fear, and rushing into exactly the contrary extreme the next ?

What had they to dread which they had not abundantly shown their ability to withstand ? The cavaliers at Aston ? But had they not already repulsed with shame and open discomfiture, aided only by a few chains and ditches, the worst these vaunting enemies could do or threat ? And for this success they had been indebted to none but themselves, for the Parliament officer had merely brought his men into the town for a few hours, to don their armour, after the attack had failed. And as for this wonderful army, which was to come over Warwickshire in a cloud of destruction and overwhelm all opposition, where was it ? Master Edward Holte, he was certain, had not seen it at Nottingham. And on such childish threats and bugbears were they to take panic terror, and resolve to throw Birmingham open to the dissolute and debauched soldiery and supporters of the King, who would immediately use their opportunities to introduce every species of licence and profanation into their as yet honest and God-fearing town ?

What mattered the heady stirring up of the poorer sort of the place, which has been so much enlarged upon, but was chiefly on the side of gospel truth and the spreading of religion, in reality, compared with the contamination and ruin which thus awaited them? Everyone knew what manner of man was Sir Thomas Holte, of Aston Hall; and what kind of better behaviour should be expected from his allies and guests? What safety would there be for the town from the most solemn assurances, from such perjurers, if they once relinquished its guard and close defence?

Therefore himself, the master armourer, declared he never would consent to any kind of pretended peace and making up of differences, which could not be, since those he spoke of were as between darkness and light; but would faithfully adhere to the declaration made by the town in favour of the Parliament, with whatsoever strength of friends and adherence might remain to him. And as for the freedom of trade declared, it was verily a liberty granted to serve either God or Baal, at men's pleasure; and only the idolators of Baal, in their secret souls, would demand or accept the privilege.

Johny-the-Rogue, who felt himself strongly glanced at in this latter remark, contented himself, nevertheless, with retorting, 'Ah, my sir, but you had secured all "God" first to yourself, with the Parliament Captain; and poor under-craftsmen, like me, cannot make our wine-presses overflow by looking over hedges into our neighbours' flourishing vineyards.' And the force of the observation was evidently appreciated by a considerable number in the assemblage.

The master armourer's opposition did, nevertheless, as clearly produce a great effect. It visibly much troubled Tubal, who muttered, 'Nay, if the town's councils be thus divided, we shall have nothing come of it all but ruin and misery!' But his eye at this moment falling upon Edward Holte's anxious and excited countenance, his ideas seemed to sustain an electric shock of change, and, with a sudden fierceness and masterfulness of look and manner and word, which diffused a new emotion through the audience, he exclaimed, 'I must let you too, then, my masters, know who is Lord of Birmingham; and how of old time and usages it was always the Lord of Birmingham that spoke for the town, and fought for it, and had the good ordering of it, and you burghesses had nothing to do in the matter except to obey, and carry out his will. So now, I say, I will accept the King's peace offered us, and I will see it enforced in all its points; conditioning only, Master Holte, that the soldiers of the King are ordered to leave quarterage at Aston, and approach us no nearer than as we shall give fair permission to them under my hand and seal.'

'Why, Tubal, can you write? I thought not; and it is not much the use of our craft,' said the audacious Winkyn Sainsfoy, who was aware that, from the circumstances of his early rearing, Tubal Bromycham's education in scholarly respects had been extremely deficient, even in that unschooled age.

He looked rather alarmed, however, as to the effect of the taunt, and shrunk his spare little framework of mortality as far as might be out of reach. But somewhat to his surprise, Tubal answered quite pleasantly,

'Yes, Weasel, I *can* write now ; and I do purpose to make myself, at whatever toil of hand and brain, in all other respects what a gentleman of my degree by birth and descent should be.' And quietly turning to Edward Holte, he inquired if he consented, on the part of the King, to the conditions named.

'I think—I am sure—there can be no objection to so reasonable a demand,' Edward replied.

'When it is assured us, I will then open my town to all in-comers, and its trade shall be free again to all the world,' returned the Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham.

'And truly herein we have a fair specimen of the kind of government, or rather masterful and unlawful tyranny, we may ever expect from kings and their pretended representatives,' exclaimed Firebrace, fiercely. 'But since you take on you so, Tubal Bromycham, take also notice that from this moment I withdraw from you all leading and command over the smiths' guildsmen, which you only exercise by my leave and licence, and which I resume now in my proper hands.'

'It must not be, Father Firebrace,' returned Tubal, with a firm but regretful expression. 'All men who draw the breath of life in Birmingham are bound to do suit and service in arms to the lord thereof whenever called upon. Deem you I have not made some use of my learning to look into the old books in the Moat House, and see what authority and right are truly mine?'

'It shall be seen, however, Master Bromycham, whether the smiths of Birmingham will obey their old chief and master, or a Walsall collier lad preferably,' returned Firebrace, giving way to his indignant feelings. 'I will go and discharge my workpeople at once from attendance on you and your cannon at St Martin's Church, and take my daughter home to my own safe keeping and custody ; for I am not one of those fools whom experience cannot make wise : and will leave to you solely and wholly the rewards of the confidence you profess in the goodwill and honourable dealing of the Holtes of Aston.'

So saying, the passionate old man withdrew in an evident fury of disappointment and suspicion, leaving Edward Holte apparently victor, but no triumphant one, upon the field.

In other respects, the acquiescence in Tubal's decree became general ; particularly after Johnny-the-Rogue had observed, with his crafty smile, 'What our lord does is none of our doing, then, it would appear ; and for my part, I am content both King and Parliament should remember it. But in the way of trade, Master Holte, if you be still so minded as to weapon your troop in the King's service in Birmingham, I think I can supply you at as reasonable a cost as the Crown Forge doth the Parliament, and am willing thereto.'

Edward courteously acceded to this offer, anxious to conciliate a person who seemed of influence, and to secure himself a good pretext for future visitation in Birmingham. Perceiving, moreover, the doubtful balance of opinion and authority in the assemblage, he determined to take Tubal's declaration as a sufficient acceptance of the proposal he had made on the part of the town. He therefore dexterously thanked the good burgesses of Birmingham for their loyal and reasonable demeanour on

the occasion, promised that he would immediately procure from Nottingham a confirmation of all that had been done, took a graceful farewell of the meeting, and retired.

CHAPTER LXIII.

SUTTON CHACE.

TUBAL followed his Royalist friend out of the Guildhall, and rejoined him in the street. Discussing what had occurred, the two young men then turned, by tacit consent, to retrace the way to St. Martin's Church.

Both agreed it was a great disaster, Armourer Firebrace having exhibited himself so openly hostile to all that was proposed.

'Many of the precision elders of the town will follow where he leads,' said Tubal. 'And it is true the most part of my young men look up to me chiefly as the representative of the head of their craft. Saw you not I dared not put it to the vote, but was forced to take it all upon me, like this poor King, with his refractory Parliaments? It is almost as well there are the Anabaptists, swearing vengeance against Dorothy, to keep the greybeards and Firebrace in awe, and compel them to look to me always for safety and defence. How say you, Master Holte?'

'It little likes me, howbeit, Dorothy should remain in a town so tossed with feuds and ready for mutiny,' replied the clandestine bridegroom. 'But when you can no longer rely on yourself and your friends for her protection, Tubal, I trust you will send due word to me at Sutton, where I shall soon have assembled a troop of horse at my devotion and yours in that case.'

'Nay, Master Holte,' exclaimed Tubal, with warmth; 'never dream that I purpose or will suffer any such treason to my town as to admit armed men, come whence they may, to the control. But nothing shall injure Dorothy while these arms of mine can heave a hammer, nor will the Anabaptists soon again try conclusions with me. You may depend, too, *I fear me*,' he continued, with a smile, 'on Master Firebrace's diligence in looking after his child, whom I doubt not he has already taken away home to his strong-barred house, from the church.'

Edward had little doubt of this fact either, though he struggled to hope on against hope.

'However it be, Tubal,' he said, after some final suggestion that they might yet find Dorothy in St. Martin's, 'I owe to you much gratitude, and trust yet to owe you more, for your furtherance of my honest love.'

'You know how to repay me, Master Holte,' said Tubal, with emotion.

'I will not fail,' Edward replied sadly and evasively of what he knew was meant, 'to send due word to his Majesty how faithfully you have bestirred yourself in his affairs here, and place before him in the same breath the unmerited wrongs of your ancestors, and your just claims on such rights and restitution as are yet in the power of the Crown to afford you in Birmingham.'

Tubal, however, seemed highly satisfied with the promise, for a reason Edward had overlooked, and knew not still what reliance could be placed on.

'Tis as I would have it, then, in all respects. For your glorious sister has only to know that Tubal the blacksmith is a gentleman, and with some means as one, to forgive his former presumption, and restore him to the happiness else for ever lost !'

Edward suppressed the deep sigh that rose in his breast ; and yet this confident reiteration infused some degree of hope into himself, not unmingled with curiosity to ascertain whether there was any better foundation than the delusive sorceries of passion for the young man's belief,

What was apprehended was found to be the case at the church. Only the Coopers and Mr. Lane remained there—Dorothy was gone—when Edward re-entered St. Martin's, leaving Tubal, he knew not why at the moment, behind, outside.

Dame Cooper readily explained. 'Within the shortest while after you were hence that we could expect to hear of any mischance, enters me the master armourer, looking so black and angrified that methought he had discovered all, and was as ill-content his daughter should become a gentlewoman as another would be to have her wed below her degree. But, by good mercy, he knew nothing at all of the matter, only was very peevish, and set on his daughter's leaving at a moment's word, as if there were fire and powder in his 'Come, minx, and look to keep close house awhile in Deritend !' And when she asked but leave, all weepingly and whimperingly, poor soul, for me to accompany her, he would not have it so by any means, but croaks me out that henceforth he had taken his part, and intended that all of his house should do the like, and so would suffer no royalist spies of whatsoever sort within his doors ! And she was obliged to go at once.'

Edward's intense disappointment showed plainly enough in his face.

'Alas, Dame Cooper,' he said, 'now will the stern old man bar me of all access to my gentle bride, and I am as one who has looked into paradise only to have the grating dashed in my face.'

'Nay, nay, good Master Holte, say not so, and with so lackadaisical a crossing of your arms on your poor breast. What ! the art of twisting rope-ladders is not yet quite lost among mankind, and where there's a will there's a way—nay, there are half-a-dozen ways, to my knowledge, into the old Crown House. Ay, and there are dark nights enow to be hoped for yet in Birmingham, though it be the full harvest moon at present, to cloak a lover's secret steps. Nay, rather than so kindly a pair should be altogether disfurnished of a dove-cote to bill in, I will, methinks, consent to remain awhile in this mad town, and make you welcome to some poor home I may yet call my own.'

Edward upon this eagerly explained to the wife of the ex-bailiff how, under present circumstances, she might conscientiously allow her husband to resume his duties and residence at the Moat House ; and he was repeating what Tubal had said on the subject to the friendly woman, when the young smith rejoined him abruptly in the church.

Tubal's aspect had so remarkably gloomed over, in the brief interval

of their separation, that Edward noticed it at once, and inquired the reason.

'Slife, sir, how came you not to miss the cannon-piece as I did when we first arrived? And find now that Firebrace gave orders to a party of the smiths to wheel it back to Deritend; and here is William Moorcroft come to tell me the armourer has secured his strong gates, and ordered the great furnace to be got in readiness to melt the cannon into a clump of iron again, lest, as he pretends, it should fall into the hands of your cavaliers.'

'Can you not rescue it? The artillery is yours, not Firebrace's,' exclaimed Edward.

'And come to blows with a man whom for years I have looked upon as a father?' said Tubal, and Edward felt it was useless to say any more on the subject.

Such was the state of disruption and confusion of policy and interests private and public, in which Edward Holte was obliged to leave Birmingham after that day of contention and strife, which had yet included the marriage of two lovers so tenderly and truly devoted to each other.

One little satisfaction, however, he secured ere he went, Dame Cooper consenting to allow her husband to resume his office and residence at the Moat House, on the conditions previously assured by Tubal.

'She had no animosity against Master Bromycham himself,' she said, 'who was as good an artisan of his trade as need be, put by his craze to fancy himself a lord, and there was room enough and to spare for Noah and his ark in the Moat House; and for any harm the blacksmith gentleman had done her, and hers thus far, she was even'd with him, tit for tat, and might be more so yet!' And Edward, who knew the significance of his secret ally's phrases, and that no real injury was meant Tubal by himself, was well content to find he had secured a trysting-place, easy of access from outside Birmingham, as soon as the vigilance of his unconscious father-in-law should abate.

Tubal and he parted with mutual and sincerely felt expressions of friendship and good-will, Edward promising to keep him well informed as to the further results of the business they had just concluded.

The comparatively quiet of the streets no longer called for alarm on the part of Mr. Lane, as he and Edward Holte rode together out of the town. Not to mention that the poor clergyman's mind was now possessed with a new and engrossing subject for anxiety. Edward indeed was quite wearied with the ceaseless cautions to preserve the recent event a secret; if for no other reason, for the sake of his unfortunate friend and tutor, who had so madly consented to place his all at stake to please him. And on this account he was glad when they reached the gates of Aston Park, where they separated; the culpable chaplain to return to the Hall, Edward to pursue his arranged plan of retiring to Sutton Manor House.

But the former had yet another nerve-shaking duty imposed upon him; which was to convey to Prince Rupert, and all else whom it might concern, the statement that terms of peace had been arranged

with Birmingham, which would be duly certified to his Highness as soon as they had obtained the royal approval.

This instruction given, Edward and the chaplain parted, and Master Holte took the way quite alone over Sutton Chace, to the ancient manor-house known by the name.

At this period the extensive district, still dearest to the holiday-making Birmingham artisan, from its wild but picturesque freedom from limits and inclosure, was considerably more varied in characteristics than at present. Its wastes of broom and bog were relieved by deep masses of woodland, carefully pierced with paths for the convenience of the deer, in which the district abounded, as well as with various winged game. The Bowen Pool was almost entitled to take rank as a lake, and the extensive marshes, from which its sedgy bed at later periods could scarcely be distinguished, were covered with a forest growth of immemorial antiquity. William the Conqueror was said to have built the Royal Manor-House situated in the deepest part of this sylvan territory, and to have hunted in Sutton Chace six hundred years even before Edward Holte traversed it on this occasion two centuries ago.

Indeed, so faithfully does popular tradition preserve the feeling of bygone ages, it was a current superstition all over the district at the time, that the stern Norman Nimrod's apparition still haunted the scene of his early delights in the flesh over Sutton Chace; not in any pleasurable enjoyment, it is to be remarked, but as a kind of purgatorial punishment for the wrongs and cruelties he had been guilty of, in clearing the vast districts he dedicated to his favourite sports of their nobler original inhabitants, to leave the solitudes necessary for deer and boar. In truth, the story ran, that whenever the apparition crossed the affrighted vision of peasant or keeper, always in the form of a gigantic knight mounted on a gigantic steed, horse and rider both seemed to glow red-hot with internal fire! And the impression was confirmed by the fact that wherever encountered, the apparition seemed always urging its way, through forest and brake and tangled waste of every kind, towards the Pool; wherein it usually concluded the spectacle by plunging with a hissing noise, and the usual splutter of fire and water encountering—doubtless down to its native hell, in the belief of the despoiled Saxon, who probably first beheld or fancied out so suitable a punishment for the oppressor.

This was not a pleasant association to accompany even a brave young cavalier in a moonlight ride over the three or four miles of desolate and shadowy way which Edward Holte must traverse to his new home. But luckily his mind was too anxiously and absorbingly employed on other thoughts, in which the deepest satisfaction was strongly intermingled with something of dismay and awe, when he reflected on the events of the day. He, Edward Holte—the husband of Dorothy Firebrace, the armourer's daughter of Birmingham—against his father's consent—unknown to him—plighted by him to another wealthy and high-born bride!

When Edward remembered his father's character—the adverse influences surrounding him—he was at times amazed at his own audacity; and nothing but the passionate attachment that glowed in his heart and

every fibre of his youthful being for the fair woman he had made his own, gave him courage to sustain the reflection of the dangers and troubles so evidently attendant on the event.

Yet it cannot be denied Edward was startled rather vividly back to the recollection of the dreary legend of the Waste, as the part of Sutton chiefly haunted by the red-hot apparition was called, by suddenly catching the ring of the metal of a horse's hoof in the distance before him.

He was approaching the Manor-House, but the view forward was obstructed by a remarkable eminence in the ground, called 'Loaches Banks'—long the puzzle of the antiquary, being surrounded evidently by artificial excavations, like a moat, but with no sign of ever having been occupied by a building.

Some supposed the spot to have been the site of a Roman camp ; others of a Druidical temple ; others, again, declared for its having been an ancient place of interment, whose peculiar sacredness had accumulated the bodies of the dead into this mound. But no remains whatever attested the validity of any of these suppositions, unless the last may be considered as proven from the generally credited report, that on All Souls' Night the hillock flamed round with corpse-candles. The traditions of Sutton Chace were, it must be confessed, not of a very lively order, but such as were naturally prompted by its characteristics of gloom and solitude, at most seasons of the year save in the early green and bloom of spring.

But if Edward Holte's fancy dwelt with a moment's superstitious excitement on the recollection of the fiery Phantom of the Waste, it could scarcely be considered a relief when he recognised in the bright moonlight, turning from behind the banks, the figure of his detested brother, Richard Grimsorwe.

What did he there ?

Edward believed Grimsorwe capable of every atrocity, and almost suspected him of some design of crafty assassination. As a precaution, therefore, he drew a pistol from his holsters, and by no means dissembled that he held it ready when they encountered face to face.

Grimsorwe, however, burst into a discordant, ringing laugh.

'What, brother Edward ! do you take me for a highwayman ?' he exclaimed. 'And I have been to Sutton, by Sir Thomas's wish, making all manner of arrangements for your comfort there. For when our good father came to think of it, he grew of your lady mother's opinion, that more pains should be taken in arranging a household for you, than you were likely to take for yourself. So I have been with a rare convoy of all manner of household goods for your use, and instructions to the keeper and his wife at the Manor-House, which will save you trouble in every way.'

'I am beholden to my father, whom you also style yours, Master Richard Grimsorwe,' replied Edward, yet not much in tones agreeable to the intimation. 'But believe me, after the complaints made to me by Gaspar Feldon of your conduct with his wife, and my forbidding you the Manor-House while I shall be deputy-ranger there, I am surprised that even your zeal in my service should have induced you to venture within range of Gaspar's quarter-staff again.'

‘Nay, but I knew the good fellow was out on his duties in the Chace, which often enough betides with a keeper of Sutton,’ returned Grimsorwe, still smilingly ; ‘and Esther Feldon and I may have our little signs and signals from afar. Though I say not that it is so. It is, indeed, all the foolish forester’s staring at antlers has put them in his head. And Sutton Manor-House is not a place the son of my mother,’ he continued, with a suddenly changed and ferocious look in his eyes, ‘whether you deny me a father or not, Master Holte, would choose to make the scene of an unlawful amour ! Along this fair White Walk here, it must have been, my mother made her escape from Adam Blackjack and his persecutions, with her baby in her arms—to throw herself for mercy at the feet of Sir Thomas Holte—and find it only at the bottom of Aston Swan Pool !’

‘However all this may be, I am not your injurer, Richard Grimsorwe,’ Edward Holte replied. ‘Only of this I am resolved—and I intended it all along—I will not have spies of yours posted where I am ; and I intend to find another housekeeper than Esther Feldon as speedily as may be for Sutton Manor-House.’

‘And that is precisely what my father will not suffer, and forbids your removal of any person whom he has retained in service at Sutton,’ Grimsorwe answered ; adding, in a jeering tone, ‘But what espial can so perfect a young gentleman in all the virtues as the heir of Aston Hall dread to see set upon his immaculate and loyal doings of every kind and sort ?’

Edward reflected.

‘It is true,’ he then replied, as if satisfied by some quiet reasoning to himself. ‘Let your spy therefore remain, and carry what intelligence between Sutton and Aston she likes, provided she keeps a little on this side perjury in the leasings and inventions you will put into her mouth. She will have little else awhile to come to report, but the words of discipline for a troop of horse ; and so, if it pleases you, let us meet as seldom as we can henceforth, and as good-night to you as your kindness meant to me deserves !’

Edward touched his horse with the spur, and passed Grimsorwe without relaxing his grasp on his weapon, and was speedily out of sight of his enemy.

Richard gazed motionlessly after him for several minutes.

‘No !’ he then ejaculated, ‘never again shall I, by any artifice or persuasion, induce this man to trust in me. But not the less shall my vengeance follow perseveringly in his steps, until I can stand equalled with him, if not in honour, in disgrace ! Yes, on the very scene of my hapless mother’s shame and woful doom will I retaliate like with like, as rigidly as the old law exacted and denounced, “An eye for an eye ; a tooth for a tooth !”’

CHAPTER LXIV.

SUTTON MANOR-HOUSE.

NOT greatly cheered on his own part by this interview, as may well be imagined, Edward Holte meanwhile pursued his way to Sutton Manor-House.

This ancient hunting-seat of Norman kings was, at the period, in spite of its considerable elevation near the hilly little town of Sutton Coldfield, almost completely embosomed and lost to view in depths of coëval forest.

The enormous height of the ancient trees which surrounded the old Royal Lodge gave it, in addition to its own tumble-down and ruinous aspect, a very gloomy and shadowy effect, excepting under the strongest beam of day. But, indeed, by far the greater portion of the original château had either wholly fallen into decay, or exhibited only what it had been in shattered and scattered bulks of masonry, glaring white amidst tufted mounds and hollows in the ground.

No inconsiderable portion of the timber and lighter building materials had at various periods of neglect and disuse been plundered and removed by unlicensed spoliators or grantees of unthrifty sovereigns. What remained was chiefly a low stone house, battlemented on the top of the wall, which ran between the empty and dismantled remains of two towers, and had originally formed a square central mass, known still as the 'Donjon,' or Keep. But the greater portion of the back premises having undergone the processes of dilapidation described, the Holtes, on becoming hereditary rangers of Sutton in the reign of Henry VI., had so far repaired and rebuilt the inclosure, that it presented a comfortable lodgment for a hunting-party, even in considerable numbers, and had often been so used by Henry VIII. ; while there was abundant room for the head-keeper and his family (when he had one) on the ground-floor chambers of the tower to the east, which was nothing like so shattered and rent by time as the other remaining one.

It is true the chief of these apartments were almost unfurnished, it being the custom of the Kings of England, in the good old times, to remove their conveniences about with them to their different temporary residences for amusement or business. And they were exceedingly low in the ceilings ; very gloomy and dark. And although Sir Thomas Holte, in his younger days being devoted to the chase, had fitted up a portion of Sutton Manor-House for his own use with no inconsiderable display of the taste for decoration and enjoyment he afterwards exhibited on a grander scale at Aston Hall, few vestiges remained to Edward's day.

Report, indeed, would have it the baronet had made these improvements and embellishments with a view to contriving a secure and unmolested seclusion for the unfortunate mistress whose tragical fate has been so often alluded to in this narrative. But Sir Thomas never resided at Sutton after his marriage, and consequently the suite of chambers running the length of the ground-floor building, of which Edward's hereditary taste for field sports had early induced him to take possession,

were in a sad state of mouldering and decay. But his attention being otherwise devoted, he had concerned himself only to restore some of the chambers to decent habitable order.

The entrance to the 'Donjon' was through the Keeper's Tower, as it was called, upon which numerous well-kept passages and clearings through the thick surrounding woodland conducted. Edward had, therefore, no difficulty in making his way to it, and the weary snorting of his steed might alone have announced his arrival, when he came to a halt; but a horn hung over the gateway for the purpose.

Edward expected the door to be opened by the keeper, Gaspar Feldon, but it was his wife who responded to his appeal. And then he remembered it was unlikely Richard Grimsorwe would have visited the house, except in the absence of the keeper—a man of a sturdy and determined character, of enormous size and strength, and with whom he knew himself to be an object of the bitterest suspicion and dislike, for reasons the most exasperating, even if not established on very clear and undeniable foundation.

Esther Feldon, the wife, was, however, by no means what one would have supposed a likely person to figure as an occasion for strife in the prosecution of a wicked intrigue of the kind. She was a tall, thin, Puritanical-looking woman, with a long melancholy countenance, whose characteristic expression was singularly whimpering and wobegone, in consonance with the apathetic sadness and monotony of her habitual tones and language.

In truth, it was strange how reports could have arisen to the disadvantage of a personage seemingly of such starched and glum demeanour, and who, besides, had always enjoyed a reputation for unusual strictness and propriety of conduct, until Grimsorwe intruded himself—some time previously to the events we have related—upon his brother's society at the Manor-House.

To be sure, Esther Feldon was not altogether in good odour in the neighbouring little township, in consequence of being reported a frequenter of the conventicles of the Birmingham Anabaptists; but her personal appearance ought in other respects to have guaranteed her. Apart from her unpleasant and unhappy general expression, both her eyes were remarkable for an indirectness of vision—not exactly amounting to a squint, but giving the face a screwed-up and sinister cast. Her complexion, however, though pallid, was very clear, and her hair of a bright raven-black, though plastered as closely to the head, under her plain linen cap, as the paint which represents that adornment of the sex on a Dutch doll. And she was certainly a woman of a mind and education considerably above others of her class; which might be accounted for by the fact of her being the daughter of a parish-clerk at Sutton, who in his day had so great a reputation for learning that he was currently reported to be able to give the Psalms out in Hebrew if he thought proper.

It was never very easy to guess at Esther Feldon's real sentiments from her words, or look, or manner. And Edward Holte could not at all divine whether his arrival displeased the woman or otherwise—was expected or not by her, from anything she said or looked. 'Master

Holte,' she observed, without the slightest intonation of any sort, much as if she had been an automaton machine fashioned to sound the words.

Nevertheless, Edward had no reason to doubt Grimsorwe's statement that he had been beforehand in making arrangements for his comfort. He was in reality almost startled by the changes which in a few hours had been effected by the surprising zeal of his brother and his satellites.

Under their labours, an unsuspected richness of hanging and gilded ornament had reappeared on the walls and cornices from the dust of a quarter of a century. The principal living-rooms were carpeted; and some handsome pieces of furniture transported from Aston Hall gave the two principal apartments an air of comfort and even stateliness.

These opened one into the other, and consisted of a saloon, a bed-chamber, and a small cabinet stored with all the materials for hunting and fishing—there being some famous preserved sheets of water for the latter purpose within the extensive range of the Sutton territory. And from the windows of these apartments, pleasant though shadowy views into the neighbouring forest were caught, and from the farthest one a wide opening revealed an expanse of gorse-blooming heath and hillocky lowland and upland, terminating in the wild and picturesque elevations of the Beacon Barr.

Esther Feldon led the way, with a dim taper in her hand, through these improvements without making any remark, or seeming to think that any was called for. But Edward's surprise certainly took a strong shade of anger and vexation when he observed that some of the alterations seemed especially adapted for feminine use.

Above all, a toilette and press were arranged in the sleeping apartment of a showy and elaborate device, which he felt it was almost an insult to have fitted up for the accommodation of a solitary bachelor sportsman, who besides proposed to himself the training of a troop of newly-raised recruits.

'Body o' me! did Richard Grimsorwe imagine his mother is coming back to her old habitation?' he exclaimed in a passion, much excited by the notion that it was pretended he purposed following in his sire's unhappy steps, in his habitation of Sutton Manor-House.

'I know not; what is done is done by order,' the apathetic Esther replied. 'But I would fain hope not, Master Holte; though Adam Blackjack ever asserts he has traced young Maud's ghost hundreds of hundreds of times, in the white night-clothes she escaped in, over the waste from Sutton to the Swan Pool in Aston pleasure-grounds.'

'Adam Blackjack is a madman, and worse than a madman; I will have my father admonished of his dealings with our worst enemies, and the frenzied calumnies he spreads!' Edward angrily responded. 'But who else then, prithee, Mistress Feldon, is expected to take up her abode here of your sex?'

'I know not, sir; I made no questions—never do. I did what I was bid; but, truly, I heard some talk that perchance your sister, Mistress Arabella.'

‘I trust it shall be so ; and in that case let the trumpery remain,’ said Edward, endeavouring to soothe himself into the belief that such might possibly be the true explanation. But, at all events, he determined to foil the intention if, as he now began to expect, it was supposed he would make some outbreak on the subject which would call attention to it, and admit of any variety of misinterpretation. Then declining the offer of the keeper’s wife to furnish him with some supper, and only requesting her to desire her husband to attend to his horse on his return, she glided gloomily out, and he was left alone.

CHAPTER LXV.

LOVE’S LABOURS.

THE first use Edward made of his retirement was to write a full account to Lord Falkland of the success of his negotiations with the town of Birmingham.

It must be excused to the lover-husband of Dorothy Firebrace if he presented by far the best side out of all the circumstances of this affair.

He almost totally suppressed the part taken in opposition by the master armourer, ascribing the degree of repugnance he had experienced to his proposals to the natural unwillingness of men to own themselves practically in the wrong, or to have been forced into actions against their own better judgment.

It was not easy to exaggerate the courage and good-will exhibited by Tubal Br. nycham in suppressing the revolutionary movement of the populace in Birmingham. But Edward certainly made the best of it, and took the opportunity to represent and urge the claims of the Blacksmith Lord on a restoration of his rank, and of the possessions of his family the Crown had it easily in its power to grant. His friendly zeal represented in shining lights the advantages of such an act of justice to the Crown itself, exhibiting as it would to all the world his Majesty’s sincere desire to remedy all real abuses in administration, since he even repaired the wrongs of his predecessors. It would secure an adherent of dauntless courage and resolution, able almost alone to retain the important place in question faithfully in his sovereign’s allegiance.

It may be thought Edward Holte took still more special pains to declare the dangers encountered by Dorothy Firebrace in her faithful adhesion to the royal cause, and to dwell upon the heroic courage and resignation with which she had endured the consequences of the popular exasperation. Edward was too good a logician not to confine this ill-feeling to the lower classes of the town, where in reality it chiefly prevailed.

On the other hand, he was enabled with truth to state that a large proportion of the masters and upper work-people of Birmingham desired nothing so much as to be left to pursue their trades in peace. Of course he concluded by stating that his Majesty’s offers towards such had been most thankfully received by the persons of influence in the town ; and that they had agreed, on full consideration, to accept the terms pro-

posed, on one only and very fair condition, which the safety of the town certainly demanded : this was, we know, that before they threw down their barriers and opened their forges to the supply of the King's army his Majesty would be pleased to direct the removal of the cavalry force from Aston and any other near vicinity. And this condition, Edward went on to say, being so reasonable and just in itself, and the best means to prevent further danger of concussion and outbreak, he had taken upon himself to all but assure in his Majesty's name.

Edward urged the immediate confirmation of this arrangement upon the friendly Secretary of State, with all possible warmth and earnestness—natural enough under his circumstances ; and, to add every weight to his entreaty, announced that he had himself retired to Sutton Manor-House in order not to annoy the townspeople with the neighbourhood of his own troop of horse, which he was now proceeding to assemble, arm, and discipline with all imaginable diligence.

And to effect this object, Edward Holte most zealously bestirred himself at once, conscious of his increased burden of responsibility, and that every moment was of consequence in providing against the dangers certain to follow on a discovery of his secret engagements.

Only the most powerful protection and patronage could be of use in this way ; and Edward knew no better means to secure the King, than to show himself forward and eager in arms on his side. Moreover, the bustle and activity of the movement were likely to divert the suspicion and espionage which he had so much reason to consider fixed upon him.

The occupation also divested his mind from the tedious anxiety with which he expected news from his clandestine bride in Birmingham, by the aid of the friendly services engaged there in his behalf.

Sutton Woods and Manor-House accordingly—in a few hours, one might say—became the head-quarters of the Holte Dragoons, as Edward had determined to name his corps. And about six score hardy young yeomen, who had long been expecting the summons, joyfully joined the standard of their landlord's heir, for the most part as volunteers, well mounted on their own horses, and ready and willing, with a very little instruction, to form a dashing and enterprising corps in the service of their King.

In reality, it happened as Charles had expected on the conjuncture. The tidings, which he took every pains to spread, of the audacious design—hardly frustrated—on his person, aroused very greatly the zeal of his partisans, and awakened them to the conviction that the war was a real war, and must be met as such. In every part of England the loyal nobility and gentry were seized with alarm and indignation, and preparations which might else have continued to languish took all the forms of movement and activity. But at the same time the undesired result followed, that the formidable man whom it was most the interest of Charles, if he had known it, to keep in the background, was suddenly brought forward into a notice and publicity that sped him faster on his path of pre-eminence than almost anything else could.

These military occupations, and softer and more engrossing cares of the heart, filled up Edward's time so absorbingly, that day after day

passed without his noticing the superfluous lapse of time that intervened before he received any reply from Lord Falkland. Neither had Mr. Lane communicated with him from Aston Hall.

But matters continued apparently quieted in Birmingham, under the energetic handling of Tubal Bromycham; insomuch that the Anabaptists apparently withdrew the claims of their champion, and Whitehall being elected minister of the town, the bellows-blower retired of his own accord, without awaiting an ejection, from the Parsonage. Even Firebrace's exasperation and suspicions appeared in some degree lulled, and somewhat more friendly relations were resumed between him and his long-intended son-in-law. Nay, on the latter proposing himself as an escort for Dorothy in taking some necessary air and exercise (for she began to look very ill in the confinement to which he at first subjected her), the armourer allowed her to leave his precincts in charge of her quondam betrothed. It was plain, in fact, that the old man's favourite hopes revived, ignorant as he was of Tubal's overmastering motives to lend aid in the progress of his supposed rival's happier fortune.

But even 'Master Shakespeare, of the Globe,' indeed, has said nothing truer than in his famous lines on the always thwarted and perplexed course of 'true love.' And Edward Holte was painfully disturbed in his enchanted dreams of successful love and military glory, almost as soon as he had raised the brimming nectar—of the former draught of paradise, at all events—to his lips.

A reply reached him from Lord Falkland, which, in parts favourable to his most earnest wishes, was wanting in some most important points, and visibly disastrous in others.

He was informed that the King approved of all he had done in effecting the peace, with the exception that his Majesty insisted on the town of Birmingham laying itself open at once to the quartering or passage of his troops, instead of so undutifully demanding that they should be removed elsewhere.

The principal reason in receiving the town so easily back again into pardon and grace, it was declared—after its seditious outbreak, with the means of punishment ready at hand—was its alleged great convenience for military use.

In the opinion of its value in that respect Prince Rupert so entirely joined, that he had resolved as speedily as possible to fix his head-quarters in Birmingham; and, meanwhile, would not think for a moment of leaving Aston Hall, where he found himself very well situated for intelligence and communication with most of the other scattered gatherings of the King's forces. And would remain more needfully so, as his Majesty himself intended to retire on Shrewsbury, to place himself at the head of the now considerable army collected in the west, and from Wales and Ireland, in his behalf. And to Shrewsbury Edward Holte was ordered with all possible speed to hasten with the mounted levy he announced himself to have formed, his Majesty's forces in this direction being chiefly of infantry, and cavalry specially requisite and desirable for the guard of his royal person on his various extended movements among the loyal population of the west.

In addition to the exceeding distastefulness for a young bridegroom,

in the first bloom and glow of triumphant love, to be called upon to leave his adored, Edward Holte could not but vaguely surmise something of sinister and plotted in all this arrangement.

It seemed strange that the only condition upon which Birmingham insisted, should be the only one denied. Strange and ungracious too, in the last degree, to add so much that was unsavoury and menacing in the demand that the town should be thrown open. Very strange that such importance should be attached to the attendance on the person of the King of a raw troop of volunteer horsemen, who had hardly yet received their arms, much less exercised them. Something pointed and confirmed in the summons to him and them to remove so far from the neighbourhood of a town with which the young captain had evinced such kindly sympathy.

But besides his own reflections, Edward Holte found a few lines affixed to Falkland's official communication which greatly added to their discomfort and suspicion.

The amiable secretary expressed himself in a cautious way, as was natural, considering the disturbed times and the chances of interception. But he stated to Edward Holte that he apprehended persons and opinions that meant no good to the town, whose interests he desired to serve, had gained a great ascendancy with the King.

A certain Count O'Taaffe, an Irish soldier of fortune, who, under a great appearance of jollity and freedom of demeanour, concealed singular talents for intrigue and cajolery, had arrived at court from Prince Rupert. Charles had lent a ready ear to his statements and opinions on the subject of the town of Birmingham; and he, Lord Falkland, had good reason to believe that all that had been resolved upon in relation to that place, was by the advice and insinuation of this Irishman. The Council had scarcely been consulted on the matter, the King insisting on the condition he named in the most peremptory and determined manner, and refusing, in fact, to hear any reasons to the contrary; so possessed was his mind with the artful suggestions made to him.

Not a single word was said about Tubal Bromycham!

Edward Holte knew enough of the character and double-minded procedures of Charles I. to feel that the information he received gave scope for the greatest anxiety that some ill turn in the whole transaction was to be dreaded. This uneasiness was, however, greatly heightened in more than these respects by a communication he received shortly afterwards from Aston Hall.

Having been expected in vain for several days, Mr. Lane arrived at last at Sutton, with a face more than customarily full of ill omen and disaster.

Besides being so absorbingly engaged in personal affairs, Edward had refrained from sending to inquire the motives of this absence, from consideration for the panic alarm of the poor old man, and his dread of implication in any discovery of the recent transactions. And unwilling to subject himself to scrutiny, offended almost equally with his father's and brother's behaviour towards him, and having hardly a moment's time to spare, he had not himself made any visitation to Aston. He wished, besides, not to present himself before Prince Rupert, whose

peremptory manner he so little relished, until the business with Birmingham was settled, and his Highness in fair course at least of removal thence.

Now this hope was over. The Prince seemed rather confirmed in residence at Aston; and from all Edward learned from Mr. Lane, seemed more than ever to regard his quarters as fixed.

Far from removing them, the number of his troops was swelling constantly, so that Aston Park began to put on the appearance of an extensive cavalry encampment. Trumpets and kettle-drums resounded in all directions, night and day. Artillery was expected from York. And not only had the Prince treated Mr. Lane's announcement of the agreement arranged with contempt and disdain, but he openly declared his conviction that as soon as his royal uncle was placed in possession of the real facts of the case, he would disavow the absurd bargaining which had assured the worst rebels in England exemption from the due penalty of their misdeeds. Nor was it at all concealed that Count O'Taase was despatched to court with earnest advice to this effect.

The kind old man had been alarmed from bringing this intelligence sooner, hoping to divert the suspicions he apprehended might have been excited by his attendance on his young patron into Birmingham. Yet, he confessed, he had been so closely questioned as to all that happened there, by Sir Thomas, and cross-questioned by his lawyer, that he frequently grew confused and alarmed, and scarcely knew what he had said.

But the most disquieting part of the intelligence remained to be communicated, and Mr. Lane proceeded upon it with evident marks of discomposure and anxiety. But he could not in his conscience, he declared, with tears gushing to his kind simple eyes, but state that from what he had observed, Prince Rupert was likely to crown his influence with Sir Thomas Holte by marrying his fair daughter. All who saw them together remarked what lovers they had become, and it was the general talk and expectation of the house and village at Aston, that the haughty young lady there would be fitly wedded at last to the nephew of a king.

It seemed not to have entered the loving-hearted clergyman's head to doubt but that matrimony must be the end of all this wooing and company-keeping he described between the royal dragoon and the beautiful daughter of his host.

Mr. Lane had spent the greater portion of his life in dependence on the wealthy baronet, an admiring spectator of the development of his grandeur and greatness. Even so exalted an alliance seemed, therefore, by no means out of the possible culmination of these glories; especially as the Prince was so poor and Sir Thomas so rich, and the latter talked openly and very significantly now of doubling, and even trebling, the fortune he had originally intended for his daughter in case she married, as he thought she could not fail, to his mind.

Mr. Lane was only concerned at the disastrous influence these demands upon Sir Thomas's purse, and his increased pride in so illustrious an alliance, might have in reconciling him to the one contracted in secret by his son.

But Edward was assailed by a deeper and less personal apprehension.

He was, besides, conscious that he was scarcely fairly reciprocating Tubal Bromycham's generous helpfulness in his own love affair. He determined, therefore, to ride over to Aston Hall at once, and endeavour to obtain some decisive understanding in the affair. Above all, if possible, to discover his sister's real sentiments as regarded her devoted admirer in Birmingham, and to put her unmistakably on her guard in the perilous hallucination in which she seemed to consider herself safe and triumphant, dancing on the verge of a precipice.

In deference to Mr. Lane's alarm, however, he deferred the visit till the following day, that it might not seem prompted by any report of his. And, moreover, while the good clergyman was partaking of some refreshment with him, Gaspar Feldon, who had been for a portion of the contract with Johny-the-Rogue, and had his orders to call on Dame Cooper at the Moat-House, brought also a billet, written in a tremulous hand, but which seemed to the enamoured young husband like a sun-beam shaped into letters.

'I have fair leave from the master you wot of to go with our good friend, whom also you wot of, to the *Cherry Orchard* this afternoon; yet, in good truth, shall be at the *Moat House* on a dearer visitation, if I may hope to encounter there with one to whom it shall seem rather a palace of love, built so that at least the windows may overlook Paradise!'

CHAPTER LXVI.

A LOVE-SONG.

EDWARD HOLTE was decidedly in a good humour with himself and all the world, on the morning he rode from Sutton Manor-House to Aston Hall, on his promised visit. In spite of serious checks and drawbacks in other matters, he was now so perfectly happy and triumphant in his love, that everything moral and physical in nature and in humanity seemed to take the splendid rosy hues of his delightful reveries, which inundated, as it were, the universe in a sunshine coloured from the heart.

The sombre depths of the ancient forest he traversed—the dark stagnant pools—the expanses of dreary, herbless bog—the tracts of barren uncultivated waste—the mystical mounds and trenches which had so possibly once been a temple for the sanguinary rites of Druidism—all shone in his happy eyes with a light not their own, but bright as a dream of Paradise.

He hoped the best of everything, even of his father's and sister's infatuation respecting Prince Rupert. It could not be but that in the end they would listen to reason and common sense. Especially his sister; for it must be, it should be—however misled she might be by ambitious fancies—that in her heart she preferred the generous Tubal.

As regarded the latter, there was no occasion to be uneasy. Dorothy was to explain to him the King's obstinacy, and point out that he had only to persevere on his own part to bring his Majesty to reason. Any way, military necessities would most likely soon compel the Prince to remove his quarters from Warwickshire.

For himself Edward considered he had ample excuses for delaying obedience to the orders he had received to attend the King in the west, in the unfurnished and undisciplined state of his newly-levied corps.

It was, besides, a really very fine day ; the sky of a lovely warm blue, with an atmosphere of that brilliant transparency which produces all the colouring of nature in the most vivid contrasts and effects. The rich, brew-like scent from gorse and broom came wafted constantly to Edward's sense on a playful breeze. Deer frolicked in all the glades, bees hummed on the yellow and purple bloom ; rabbits and hares showed their startled, globular eyes at every turn among the deep grass and fern. No, it was not a day—it was not a scene—for a youthful bridegroom to believe in misfortune.

These pleasant impressions continued on Edward's first arrival at the Hall. His approach up the great avenue started two rustic lovers who were met in fond tryste at a stile leading into the Park, and who proved on inspection to be Robin Falconer and Phoebe Dewsnap, a favourite and vivacious waiting-maid of his sister. From these two he learned that all was well at the Hall, and giving his horse to the former, continued his way thither on foot.

Yet was it all so well ?

Passing along the garden-front of the house, under the open windows of his mother's drawing-room—an apartment still known as Lady Holte's—Edward heard the melodious murmurs of a musical instrument, which he immediately discerned to be his sister's "virginals," as the original of the subsequent spinet, harpsichord, and piano, was styled in its earliest invention ;—the very instrument on which Tubal Bromycham, inspired by love, had exhausted his mechanical genius. And pausing for a moment to listen who the player might be, Edward heard a rough male voice—which yet he instinctively felt the owner made an effort to soften to an amorous wooingness—request that Mistress Holte would charm him with some 'lovesome ditty' to the notes. And immediate compliance followed, in accents full of a species of passionate cajolement and allurements, that, coupled with the earnest meaning of the words themselves, struck Edward with foreboding and dismay !

Of course the verses displayed the usual qualities of quaintness and stiffness in the style to be noted in nearly all the poetry of the time of Charles the First, of which, luckily, no great quantity remains. It is perhaps, however, necessary in the present instance, to ask attention to

ARABELLA HOLTE'S LOVE-SONG.

To my heart, I said, Faint Heart !

Why, like the wind-struck lute,

Dost thou sweet utterances begin

That die then, and remain for ever mute ?

For ever mute.

Dost thou fear disdain, Proud Heart,

Scorn of thy love's display ?

Rather than rue some unkind mock,

Wouldst all thy treasured sweets keep stowed away ?

Keep stowed away.

Or, the worse mischance, Poor Heart !

Fond'st awhile to be—high pinn'd—

The Armourer's Daughter.

Worn like a flower in the hat—
 A moment after cast on any wind?
 On any wind.

Yet, what worse can hap, Worn Heart,
 Than to consume as now?—
 Die, if thou must, of uttered pain;
 Not show it only on a death-pale brow!
 A death-pale brow.

Hope return, and speak, Fond Heart!
 All thy choked sighs ensconce;
 All that thy languid eye's veiled fire
 Conceals—and all belike may find response!
 May find response.

'Could I believe it possible——' Edward heard still rough but enrap-
 tured accents exclaim as the song ceased. 'Could I believe it possible,
 I—I—— I would speak! Siren-lady! I would speak—and more!'

Edward heard a sound as if a hand were clasped and kissed. But
 struck with wonder and dismay at the thought that the pair were left
 alone to their dangerous association in music, he hastened on into the
 Hall.

Inquiring there for Sir Thomas and his mother, he was informed that
 they had gone out in state in their coach and four to return the visit of
 the Lady Lyttelton and her daughter, at Hagley, and were not expected
 home till the afternoon! Miss Holte—Edward learned from the house-
 keeper—had remained at home to do the honours of the mansion to her
 father's royal guest. The rest of the officers were absent on various
 duties and excursions to out-lying posts.

Still more annoyed and perplexed, Edward murmured to himself, 'A
 brother's presence cannot be deemed an intrusion,' and made his way to
 the apartment where he was aware he should find the songstress of the
 virginals and her auditor. For it plainly appeared the Prince and
 Arabella Holte were alone together.

Neither, it must be stated, did Edward take any precautions to have
 his arrival announced; but stepping abruptly into 'Lady Holte's With-
 drawing Room,' he came upon a not altogether unexpected but extremely
 ill-pleasing spectacle to himself. Arabella Holte seated before her in-
 strument, but turned from it with eager excitement visible all over her
 vivid countenance, and Prince Rupert kneeling at her feet, with both
 her hands clasped in his, and pouring forth some but partially intelligible
 but most vehement gibberish, in a mixed rhapsody of English, German,
 and French.

Of course, Edward's arrival produced an instantaneous change of
 position. Both parties sprang on their feet, Miss Holte withdrawing
 her hands from the Royal Dragoon's strenuous grasp, and ejaculating,
 with a mixture of confusion and an attempt to pass off the affair, 'My
 brother Edward! I thought it had been Master Grimsorwe, who re-
 mained to help me entertain his Highness.' And her complexion light-
 ing with a fiery glow, made shift to add some words of welcoming,
 which died away when she remarked how coldly and severely Edward
 received them.

'Yes, sister,' was the brother's reply. 'I have made a special visita-

tion to Aston to speak with you on some matters of family importance, which should be in private. His Highness will, therefore, pardon your retirement awhile.'

Rupert laughed his hoarse trooper-laugh. 'It is time I were in the saddle myself on the business of my detachment, which is fast swelling into a little army, Master Holte!' he said; then, 'But your adorable sister sang so like an angel awhile ago, that I mistook her for one, and was rendering homage to her in the proper attitude of mankind to divinities!'

'Were you not the King's nephew, sir,' replied Edward, in by no means a similar tone of compliment, 'I should ask the meaning of so high-flown a speech. But your birth places you too far above questioning on such points, which it shall not be my fault if my sister and sire do not speedily better comprehend! Come, Arabella, I must have speech with you alone.'

'You need not drag your sister hence, then, sir, for the purpose,' returned the Prince, disdainfully. 'I did not think to ride to-day, but my horse I deem better company at any time than a churlish host, and I shall seek mine at once.'

So saying, he strode haughtily out of the apartment, beginning to hum some camp tune before he reached the door, and markedly saluted Arabella Holte alone thence as he retired.

CHAPTER LXVII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

EDWARD looked after the discourteous Prince with a bent and lowering brow, and then he turned to his sister.

'What is the meaning of all this, Arabella?' he demanded. 'What strange scene is this I have interrupted? I have the right to ask. I am your brother, and your honour and fair repute are no less mine than your own to guard.'

'Is not my father, then, my father, and so a properer judge if either be in danger, good brother mine?' rejoined Arabella, striving to adopt a light and somewhat defying tone in her rejoinder. 'And that he thinks not so plainly appears from his leaving us in the sole charge of such a bookworm as Richard Grimsorwe often shows himself of late! Alas, we poor women! It should suffice, methinks, if we follow the behests and fancies of one tyrant at a time—father, brother, husband, son, by turns—but not in pairs, or all together, sure!'

'My father is besotted by his pride and vanity. Do not show yourself his daughter most in those qualities, Arabella!' returned the brother, severely. 'But you have yourself too much good sense and experience of the pretended godship of Royalty, in your court days, ever to believe that this Royal German trooper can mean you aught but disgrace and contumely in men's eyes by his attentions.'

'Oh, but, brother Edward, things fall not always out as by their original planners are devised! The stone does not always roll where it

is cast ; and none knows better—if all we hear be true—than Edward Holte, that love obeys no laws but his own, and studies no degrees, but levels even the gods to poor humanity when so it pleases him !

Edward coloured. But he cleverly parried the meaning of the remark, and introduced a new element into the discussion.

‘Not always *levels*, Arabella ! At times *exalts*,’ he said. ‘For what but love and devotion to you has made the young man, Tubal Birmingham—lawful heir as he is of a noble race—to stand so bravely forward and reclaim the rights of his ancestry ; content as he was to exercise his matchless genius and skill in an art to which the old Greeks, indeed, gave a god, and married to the fairest of the goddesses. But, doubtless, some one of Ben Jonson’s Court Masques must have made you familiar with the pretty tale of Venus and Vulcan, since the other matters of mythology occur so pactly to your memory !’

He spoke these latter words rapidly and yet waveringly, surprised and even alarmed at the powerful effect which the name of Tubal Bromycham, introduced into the discussion, produced upon his sister. She grew deadly pale, and looked at him with singularly strained and aghast eyes.

‘Tubal *Bromycham*—Tubal *Birmingham* !’ she murmured, to herself principally ; adding, with a forced and quivering smile, ‘My brother Edward, too, infected with that man’s foolish rhapsodies !’

‘But is it all rhapsody, Arabella ?’ repeated Edward Holte, gazing earnestly at his sister’s wan complexion, that yet changed rapidly in degrees of paleness. ‘No one would say so that hears him speak ! Who believes his own falsehood ? But Tubal speaks so that no man can doubt he believes himself, and, if what he says be true, you must—you must—have loved him once !’

There was a considerable pause, during which Arabella turned her superb head away ; doubtfully whether in disdain and indignation, or to hide the overpowering emotion which certainly writhed along her brows.

‘He told you so ? The Birmingham blacksmith fellow told my brother so ?’ she then ejaculated, turning with hidden fierceness and vivacity on Edward.

‘The Blacksmith *Lord* of Birmingham has not told me so, Arabella !—has but told me so, at worst, as his own belief, his own hope—the purpose and triumph of his brave and honest life, of all his thoughts and actions, to achieve ! But if he said so, was it false ? Arabella Holte ! have you not loved Tubal Birmingham ?’

Again a pause—a peculiarly long and significant pause.

‘No !’ Arabella Holte then faintly repeated. ‘No ! I have *not* loved Tubal *Birmingham*. Never, never, never—have I loved—Tubal *Birmingham* !’

‘Sister ! Do not take refuge—do not deceive yourself and me by a sound ! Tubal *Bromycham*, then, if you will ! Have you not loved that nobleman and prince of nature’s own making—even you who now debase the glorious and fit supremacy of true loving womanhood at the feet of a coarse, contemptuous man—butcher by trade and heart—because, forsooth, his sire and dam are blazoned “royal” in the tawdry

daubings of the madmen in colouring and sprawling animals, called heralds?’

‘Is Edward Holte, then, turned Dutch republican, or something less attuned to aught that is honourable and glorious among the distinctions of humanity? What raises one above his fellows, or sets him off sunlike in the eye and observances of the world, but this same gaudy blazonry?’ returned the haughty former maid-of-honour of the haughty Queen of Charles the First. Yet Edward, with true intuition of the natural action of the passions, noticed with satisfaction that it was only in the second place she resented the personal attack on her royal admirer. ‘But is this proper language to be used by a gentleman who purposes to be a soldier, of a Prince, and already famous Captain of the wars?’ she continued. ‘A man butcher! Prithee, Captain Holte, shall you sweat in armour to other purpose than to lay low as any slaughtered oxen in the world the foes and rebels of your King?—men, at all events, in shape and the reckoning of those who will lead them to the edge of your sword?’

‘I call a mercenary soldier so. What business has this German horse-soldier killing Englishmen, in a quarrel that concerns but Englishmen?’ returned Edward, passionately.

‘Cry you mercy, Master Holte, but our enemies say the quarrel concerns all mankind, and all time, not merely England and the men of this generation! Moreover, Prince Rupert is at least half an Englishman by blood and birth—the grandson of an English king! Methinks his sword has some fair say in an English quarrel, so!’ Arabella replied, with equally angry vivacity.

‘The grandson of a *Scotch* king, if you will. What was James the First, in all truth, else, though he sat on the English throne to disgrace it, and wasted English treasures on his hateful minions? The *great*-grandson, it may well be, of an Italian fiddler!’ Edward Holte could not forbear retaliating.

Of course, he alluded to the old scandals concerning Mary Queen of Scots, and the Italian musician, David Rizzio.

Arabella coloured indignantly, as if her own pride were hurt by the insinuation.

‘What, Edward Holte! you pass in insult even the basest reviler Republican of the Parliament—for such, in their secret souls, are Vane, and Pym, and St. John, and all the rest of the talking traitors, whose heads I hope yet to see rotting on pike-staves on London Bridge and Temple Bar! Nay, I doubt if even the prodigious rapsallion, whose plans on the most sacred person of the King you take so much credit to yourself and your Birmingham mistress for foiling—’

‘My Birmingham mistress, Arabella Holte!’ Edward vehemently interrupted; and was about to rebuke his sister’s scornful expression with that one all-refuting, but most dangerous word, that rushed to his lips— But he reflected in time. Was not Arabella become, and likelier to become yet more so, the friend and ally of his enemies?’

‘It is a word no honest and honourable woman—no lady—should apply, in the ill sense doubtless you mean, of another no less than her equal in all such respects,’ he contented himself with replying. ‘Nay,’

he added, with passion, but in all sincerity, 'if things are suffered to proceed as now they seem to be set, it is rather Arabella Holte than Dorothy Firebrace—rather the proud Baronet's than the stern Armourer's Daughter—that is likely to forfeit her title to the homage due to virtue, and virtuous repute, in her sex !'

Edward was perhaps a little alarmed, and yet not ill-pleased, at the vehemence of indignation aroused in his haughty sister at this remark.

'Great God !' she exclaimed, 'what have I done to justify such insult—such atrocious insult?—from a brother, too ! I will complain to my father—to Rupert himself !—to the Prince, whose illustrious birth hinders him not to be a gentleman of honour and spirit also, and who has already drawn his sword on an insolent knave in my behalf !'

'Good heavens ! how know you that ? in my turn, I exclaim.'

So Edward did indeed.

'My father ! can he have been foolish enough ?'

Edward knew full well that nothing could be likelier to interest a woman in favour of a man than an act of protection, mingled with homage and devotion, so marked as those certainly displayed by Prince Rupert towards his sister in his whole demeanour in the affair of the quarrel with Cornet Titus. He was in proportion vexed and alarmed accordingly. Nor were these feelings diminished when Arabella answered shortly, 'No ; it was your brother, Richard Grimsorwe, sir, imparted the wonderful secret to me.'

Edward was silent for a moment. 'Mischievous complotter !' he then muttered.

'Richard Grimsorwe is no brother of mine,' he resumed bitterly ; 'and if he has become yours, Arabella, it is very recently indeed. On the contrary, I warn you, he is in his felon's heart the blackest of enemies, and contrives evil against all the children of our mother, and would rejoice to witness our utter ruin and disgrace. But let that pass now—only let us not become his fools and instruments in the work. And what else, what else, dearest sister, my only sister, my dearest Arabella, can you expect to issue from this disastrous intimacy you have formed ?'

'You begin whimpering now, Edward ; it was ever your wont. I should have been the man of the family, you its kind, soft-hearted maiden ! And yet you can insult with tears, as it would seem, of love and pity in your eyes ! For what issue say you, can I expect from this—this intimacy, I have formed ? What issue should my father's daughter, think you, expect ?' Arabella rejoined, in tones of exasperated excitement at last, though at first she was evidently moved with her brother's emotion of sorrow and tenderness.

'And do you really dream that the proudest and stateliest of Monarchs—that a King of England—that King Charles the First—who has rushed upon a civil war rather than have his grandeur and supremacy in any manner curbed or disputed ; do you possibly imagine, Arabella, he will ever consent to a lawful union between his nephew and the daughter of a country squire, whose genealogy traces back through a couple of centuries to a blacksmith's anvil, scorn blacksmiths as you may ?' Edward vehemently inquired.

'Ay, that is what our brother Grimsorwe—for he is our brother in

some sort, repudiate him as we may—oft complains of you, Edward ! complained to the Prince himself but the other day ; that since you have taken so strange an idolatry for a smith's daughter of Birmingham, you will never let the clank of the anvil cease to sound in your own genealogy !' Arabella replied, evidently endeavouring to elude the force of the previous interrogatory. But after a moment she seemed to be aware this would not do, and she added with a smile, 'But who thinks to ask our most puissant King and Lord's consent in any such matter, prithee ?'

'Mean you, then, sister, to say that this proper Prince woos you openly and plainly, in so many words, to dishonour ?' Edward fiercely rejoined, and his hand quivered as if involuntarily down to the hilt of his sword.

The gesture perhaps rather alarmed Miss Holte. 'Foolish, angry boy !' she said, but soothingly. 'What talk is this of wooing me at all ! Your head runs of nothing else, methinks, but love-making and such simple vanities, of late ! And yet you have but just thrust it in a soldier's helmet, and should think chiefly awhile, I should say, of how best to keep it there.'

'Did I not find the man at your feet, stuttering in his bad broken horse-gibberish, a declaration of some sort ?' Edward demanded.

Arabella coloured again deeply, and evidently paused and hesitated in her reply. But it was too plainly of no use to deny the fact so unmistakably witnessed.

'Well, sir, you did then ! Gallantry and homage to ladies have not yet altogether ceased to be of a soldierly and princely usage ! What more ?'

'He insulted you, then, by using the language only of *gallantry* ! In a passion of utterance—an attitude—with a look—that indicated the very frenzy of the emotion, which, in men—Arabella Holte, your brother tells you—is either love or lust !' Edward almost shouted, now.

'You wish my father, doubtless, to overhear your remarks at Hagley !' Arabella exclaimed, greatly alarmed and annoyed at this excitement, or will it content you merely to let our whole neighbourhood and menial service into the secret ? You have startled the rats in the highest bacon-loft of Aston Hall, I am certain, brother ! And yet, if you would hear me out— Ridiculous boy ! how can I say or know what the Prince's true meaning and inference from the passion he avowed would have been, since you so rudely and inopportunistly stepped in to stop him in mid career ?'

'But had he confessed love, and not spoken of marriage to you, Arabella ! What then ?'

'I would have spoken of marriage to him !'

'But what then, if the condition was not found palatable ?'

'We would have disjoined society for ever, Edward Holte—the Prince Electoral and I—that's all !' the young lady replied ; adding, with a smile of triumphant pride and self-confidence, that certainly lighted up her beauty into a kind of natural queenliness of power and supremacy, 'But deem you, simple boy, that I should ever put the decision to the hazard until I have this high-born wooer so enthralled and subdued to

my will, that *no* condition shall seem to him hard or impossible that wins the woman of his love to it?’

Edward could not but admit to himself a kind of irresistibility in beauty and arts of feminine cajolery so perfect as those possessed by this splendid pupil of courts, and born inheritrix of the highest fascinations of female loveliness. But though for a moment he rested from one venomous fang of suspicion, another twined a softer but still deadly fold on his breast.

‘If it be even so, my poor beauteous sister,’ he resumed, in sorrowful tones, ‘and granting you the most triumphant success to be hoped in the affair with this royal personage; still, do you no wrong to your own heart by straining at the achievement? Do you love the Man, or the Prince only? Nay, have you not loved—do you not still love—another? I return to the question, to which you have not yet given me any construable reply.’

Once more Arabella’s deep pallor of profound but as strongly suppressed emotion revisited her cheek. She contrived, however, to rally in a very brief interval.

‘Any construable reply!’ she exclaimed—‘any construable reply! Have not my actions long ago, as well as now, replied sufficiently for me? On the discovery of the mad mechanic’s presumption, whose cause you seem to advocate, did I not hasten at once with my complaints to my father, whose wrath, have we not all of us all our lives seen, knows scarcely any other limit than his power to follow out its dictates? Disgraceful maltreatment was the very least I had reason to believe my father would inflict on such a suitor. And did I hesitate?’

Edward was staggered in his secret opinions perhaps—certainly in his secret hopes and wishes, by this question. Nay, he was all but convinced of the fallacy of poor Tubal’s clinging credulities as to the real sentiments of the proud and ambitious daughter of Sir Thomas Holte.

‘It was a great cruelty then, surely, in you, Arabella, so to recompense the love and devotion of any man—of any human heart. Love and devotion are not such common merchandise that people can afford to throw them amid the garbage of the market-place, and trample them like cabbage-stalks and rotten gooseberries.’

‘Love and devotion,’ repeated Arabella scornfully. ‘How know we what excited all this same devotion and love in the blacksmith’s breast? Love and devotion to Arabella Holte, or to the wealthy and exalted co-heiress of Aston? For such my father thinks almost to make me if I content him by this glorious marriage; though I ask it not of him, but hope some day, rather, my husband will redeem his princely heritage with his own right hand.’

‘What, and disgraced with his only powerful patron and likely supporter, the King, for the very reason that shall most content your own family!’ said Edward; and to confess the truth, the notion, besides being so improbable in that respect, was not by any means pleasing to him. He was a husband now: and certainly, if children were granted him, he could not look forward with much satisfaction to the prospect of their being in part deprived of their inheritance, in a manner, to purchase a husband for his sister, too great and high in all probability to acknowledge the relationship.

Hitherto Arabella had only been assured of the moderate portion usually bestowed at that time even in wealthy English families on the female members, and this was probably one reason why, with her views of personal exaltation, she had felt obliged to cultivate arts of coquetry and cajolery so perfect as those she possessed.

Her brother's remark, however, seemed to produce a different effect from what he intended.

'I begin to be of Grimsorwe's opinion,' she observed, disdainfully smiling, 'that apprehension of my father's liberality in such a case would set you much against the match; though he chiefly spoke it laughingly as of himself; standing, as his fortunes do, in such mere dependence upon my father's will.'

'Well,' Edward replied, mournfully, 'I can no more against this ambitious insanity. Heaven only grant that your denial of a preference for another is truly founded! For the curse of God is upon all creatures that disobey the commandments. He has more plainly chiselled on the human heart than those of old on the stone of Horeb. If you err so completely against all the best impulses of natural womanhood, as to seek to marry a man because he is a Prince, instead of the one you truly love, of lowlier destinies, evil must come of it, Arabella Holte. If not the unpardoned sin against the Holy Ghost, surely it stands next to it among sins against the light.'

Arabella certainly looked shaken and perturbed in her own consciousness at this denunciation. It was with an effort that she replied, though with a species of lured gaiety of defiance and denial:

'I take my own sins upon my head; I ask no woman else—nor man either—to bear for me the penalties of my misdeeds. Look! I say, let the angels make record of my words, and keep them against me for the day of account and balancing! Need you more, dear Edward, brother mine? Or has your abode among the Birmingham fanatics soured you into their belief, that all must be atheists and contemners of God's laws who do not make earth itself a beforehand place of outer darkness and gnashing of teeth? Why, you are much worse of bodement and mischance to befall than the old Witch of Aston herself,' she concluded almost playfully, observing that Edward could not refrain from a smile at the former allusion, which brought very unlike associations in full tide back upon his heart. 'You know Maud Grimsorwe is said never to have wished well or kindly to our house. Yet, when she chanced upon the Prince and myself returning together on our wearied steeds from the hawking the day you left, she smiled all over her withered face and wrinkled eyes, and held up her skinny claws enclasped, and blessed us for the noblest youthful pair those weary eyes of hers had lighted on for thirty years.'

'For thirty years!—since her daughter's doom! Such blessings are curses. Long may I and mine remain unblest by the detestable hag!' Edward ejaculated; and indeed the circumstance seemed, strangely enough, to revive his apprehensions. Or else he wished to do what might yet be possible to satisfy Tubal of his own goodwill in the affair.

'But well, my dearest sister,' he resumed, 'I am grieved for it, but no longer disbelieve but that your heart may go the way our father's

ambition marshals you. The Prince may seek you in all honour and honesty, as you resolve he shall. But yet ease a brother, who has always loved you better than any proud, self-absorbed Prince in the world ever can, of his worst fears. Come and be awhile your brother's companion and bright embellishment of home at Sutton Manor-House, and all may yet be well. If the Prince loves you, he will assuredly follow you there, and I shall have the right to ask him plainly his objects and intentions in the fact.'

'Nay, nay, brother Edward! you are yourself too firequick and choleric to use a proper temperance in the matter. So far his Highness and you have never met but to dissent and spar. I shall remain at Aston, under a father's care, who falls in so agreeably in all things with the Prince's humours and tastes, that to cross them for once can scarcely chafe him much. Moreover,' she concluded with a smile that meant a good deal more than the words, 'there are not wanting those who inform me Sutton Manor-House is decked for at all events a *fairer*, and, I somewhat misdoubt me, welcomer visitant, than ever the dearest sister was, or can, or ought to be.'

Edward was excessively annoyed at this intimation, which satisfied him his suspicions of the decorations at Sutton were well founded; and was probably on the point of giving expression to the feeling, when a tap was audible at the door, and with infinitely more of polite precaution in the way of announcement than Edward Holte had observed, Richard Grimsorwe made his *entrée*, book in hand, as if he had suddenly bethought himself that his presence was needful where he had now for so considerable an interval withdrawn it.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE DAY MOON.

GRIMSORWE was visibly surprised, and even startled, on perceiving Edward.

'Now, is it you, brother Edward?' he yet said, with affected carelessness. 'His Highness was here just now, and wanted to look in this book of the Holte pedigree, which my father has lately had carried back to I know not what kings and grandees in the old chronicle-books. His Highness takes a vast interest in pedigree matters, and Sir Thomas is absent, as most likely you know. So we were glad of anything to amuse the Prince's leisure from horseback to-day. Of the two, methinks I would rather undertake the diversion of his steed; but my sister is a capital hostess, and supplies all defects.'

'I have always forbidden you, Master Grimsorwe, to speak to me as your sister,' said Arabella, with great coldness and hauteur. She, as well as her brother Edward, whom she greatly loved and admired in general, had always shared a mingled feeling of contempt and dislike towards the bastard intruder, which every circumstance had latterly tended to increase. His mean and creeping artifices in winning favour with Sir Thomas Holte were necessarily excitements to the former feel-

ing with so lofty-spirited a woman, while the now frequent developments of his dangerous and vicious character as naturally promoted the latter.

‘I will not henceforth presume against your wishes in this respect, either in word or deed, Miss Holte,’ Grimsorwe replied, seemingly in nowise concerned at the snub. ‘But where has the Prince’s Highness betaken him without seeing this pretty book? The old monks never illuminated a legend-book of their mass with brighter enamelling than all these shields and cross-quarterings of the worshipful arms of the Holtes. Only, I would have my father put King Arthur into the pedigree root, to match the Emperor Charlemagne’s in his Highness’s. Or Charles Martel’s should it be, as an imperial set-off against our own old Hammerer?’

‘My father will believe how ridiculous he makes himself by his pretensions, when I tell him how even you make him his mock behind the back, who cringe so lowly to his face, Master Grimsorwe,’ said Edward, who now scarcely took any pains to disguise his indignation against his insidious enemy. ‘Come, sister, let us walk in the park, until my father and mother return.’

‘But we have a good dinner found and ready to be served to his Highness even now. I am a first-rate purveyor and major of the kitchen when the humour takes me. Will Miss Holte please to give her orders for the service?’ Grimsorwe replied; ‘or must we wait till the master of the house returns, and gives orders to slay the fatted calf in addition to our roasted peacocks and swans?’

Arabella was obliged to state that the Prince had gone unexpectedly from the house, and to give directions that the dinner should be put off as long as possible, or until his return. Yet, considering the manner in which he had left the Hall on his excursion, very reasonable doubts might be entertained if the Prince had not taken the huff altogether, and would not grace the meal at all with his presence.

In reality, the brother and sister had taken a long promenade in the grounds and park of Aston Hall—had reviewed and re-discussed at length the recent subject. Arabella had listened with impatience to a yet fuller exposition of all the brave and noble things Tubal Bromycham had of late performed, with a view to retrieve her favour; and yet the offended great personage had not returned.

In fact the dinner provided was quite spoilt, in spite of Adam Blackjack’s diligent cares, who was apprehensive that whoever deserved the blame he should get it, and was mostly in his senses in the exercise of his profession. And Sir Thomas and Lady Holte themselves arrived home from their solemn return visit to Hagley House without the Prince having deigned to re-appear.

It would be in vain to pretend that Edward himself was not rendered considerably uneasy by the circumstance, though, in spite of his sister’s entreaties, he determined to await explanations with his father.

And he speedily found that such would be required of him, and by no means in the pleasantest and most conciliatory style. Partly due, no doubt, to the fact that Richard Grimsorwe had met Sir Thomas at the gates, and given his own impressions of what had occurred in the first place.

Sir Thomas Holte presented himself suddenly in the garden, where Edward and his sister were walking, as in a place remote from espial, and still exchanging their opposed ideas on the recent subject of discussion, with the vehemently excited look he usually wore, even on much less occasions of irritation.

'So, Master Holte !' he exclaimed, with no other form of parental salute, 'you have taken upon yourself, it seems, a good deal more than even the mastery of my house, and have behaved yourself with such disrespect to my royal guest, that he has left word with one of his officers he shall not enter Aston Hall again as long as he is not guaranteed against your rude intrusions and uncalled-for reflections on his actions and orders in his Majesty's service in these parts.'

'Go in, Arabella, and offer my duty to my mother, while I speak with my father on this matter,' said Edward, unwilling to enter upon the explanations which he yet considered needful, and was firmly determined not to be driven from by his father's violent and overbearing demeanour.

Miss Holte, though unwillingly, complied, feeling how much more unpleasant and compromising her presence must render the scene certain to issue.

'Is it not enough that you have Sutton Manor-House entirely at your own disposal, to tenant it as you may think proper, but you must come to lord it also here at Aston Hall? Do you fancy I am dead and in my grave, and no one but your weak, foolish mother to counter-act and check your domineering assumptions?' Sir Thomas resumed, anxious to overbear his son's opposition without entering into explanations on its motives.

But Edward was resolved it should not be so. He therefore answered in a respectful but unintimidated manner, 'You are deceived, sir, if you fancy I have taken upon my hands any unbecoming sway in your house. But your daughter's honour, sir, is also her brother's; and if the Prince has gone off in dudgeon because I looked disapproval of his offering clandestine love, or at least the outward signs of it, in your absence, and that of all others who should and would protect a young maiden from such unlicensed importunity, I cannot even say that I am sorry for it.'

He then described to Sir Thomas Holte, as briefly and as little disparagingly for his sister as possible, the scene he had interrupted.

To his amazement and extreme vexation, however, far from seeming amazed or brought to a sense of the imprudence he had fostered, Sir Thomas Holte looked highly pleased and gratified by what he heard.

'Odd's bodikins, man !' he exclaimed, 'what manner of a pragmatistical knave are you turned, to find fault with a little love-making between a young soldier and the most beautiful girl in England, in an August month? I begin no longer to believe in the stories about your own sweet doings in Birmingham, though you have turned half Roundhead for the sake of a pair of bright eyes in a giglot's head. Prithee, is it not what we all expect and look for hourly, to hear that his Highness has declared him the enamoured swain which, in all men's observation as well as your wondrous wisdomship's, he has become?'

'If so much has been observed, sir, it is full time you took upon you

a father's duty, and inquired with what views all this love-making proceeds,' said Edward, with warmth.

'So ! you will teach me my duty as a father, will you, Master Holte, after the long apprenticeship I have served to the mystery?' returned Sir Thomas fiercely, though mockingly. 'Or rather, as Richard said but this morning, you would have me rush in like a madman and prevent the bees settling just as they are humming down, and play your senseless game to despise his Highness without any the like excuse?'

'Well, sir, but hear me. Nay, sir, I will be heard, if I am forced to call out my words as I would to a man both deaf and blind making for the edge of a precipice !' the son now resolutely rejoined. 'I warn you most solemnly of the danger of all you do in this matter ; and that in my own mind and heart I do not for one moment believe this arrogant foreign princeling has so much as formed the notion of the possibility of the alliance you look upon as assured.'

'Good heavens ! if this man should remain here, to put such a notion in the head of my royal guest, who, no doubt, will have enough mis-giving and counter-suggestion to overcome of his own fancy and the prompting of those around him,' exclaimed the baronet. Decidedly, Sir Thomas had not studied logic to great advantage in his college days. 'Come,' he continued, with rising exasperation, 'if I am in reality master of Aston Hall, thus I prove it, by forbidding you to return to it under pretence, Master Holte, until I summon you either to your own or your sister's still more exalted bridalty. And I have been to Hagley to-day and had speech on the business with my Lady Keeper Lyttelton, and we have all but settled the wedding shall take place before the further opening of the campaign, if it be delayed much after my Lord's arrival, who is also daily expected at home.'

Edward was dismayed at once into silence and withdrawal at this intimation.

'Well, sir,' he said, 'I shall not then infringe further on your hospitality to-day, or stand in the way of your illustrious guest's return. I take my leave, therefore, with only this word—unless the Prince declares at once to you that his intents are honourable, it behoves you to place in my hands the right and duty to rebuke the pretensions he has advanced, which will then be proven insults, and you will always find me ready and willing to the task.'

Sir Thomas folded his arms contemptuously, and looked up at the faint outline of the harvest moon, which appeared in the still glorious sky.

'You talk, son Edward,' he said, with a most thoroughly self-satisfied look, 'and so does yonder moon shine ; but neither of you much to the purpose.'

'Heaven forefend the darkness should come which will show my meaning forth, like yonder pale orb's, with a brighter glare !' said Edward, with a deep sigh, for his heart strangely misgave him, as he turned to take the departure so unparentally enforced upon him ; accepting the command however literally, quite well aware that nothing was to be hoped from his mother's interposition, and that his abrupt leaving

would be more likely to fix her attention on the causes than the most earnest entreaties he could address to her.

CHAPTER LXIX.

HOW TO KNOW WHAT HUSBAND YOU SHALL HAVE.

A FEW days after the ill-received visit of the heir of Aston Hall to that stately parental home, Maud Grimsorwe sat in her miserable cottage on the Fish Stews Pool—alone.

At least, as much alone as the aged woman's haunted imagination ever suffered her to be. For in truth it might be said of this unfortunate old creature, as was said, in a far different sense, of the ancient philosopher, she was never less alone than when alone.

Then came back—at times, it is possible, with an hallucination of actual vision—the few but tragical figures of the past, which had stamped their images, by intensity of grief and horror, indelibly in her otherwise faded mind—images that revived amidst its general feebleness and confusion (excepting when electrified into strong vitality by the energy of her powerful passions), through every half-effaced shaping of subsequent change, like ciphers scratched into a slate, do what you may with sponge and new figuring to obliterate them.

The few who ever approached her darksome and secluded dwelling would at such times hear the old woman engaged, as it seemed, in a dialogue with several visitors. And if they ventured to peep in, would perceive old Maud muttering and gibbering, and using many gestures to her unseen company; mostly seated on the edge of her miserable bed of crazy timber-work, black blankets, and patched quilt, or rocking herself backward and forward on a stool before a thriftily-fed wood-fire in her windy chimney, which was only formed by an opening in the low, moss-grown roof.

The latter was the position she occupied on the occasion we allude to—seated on an old, roughly-made milking stool, gazing fixedly into the dying glow on her hearth.

'It is not very like her face, neither,' she was also muttering; 'and, whatever Adam Blackjack may say, I will never believe my child is in hell-fire now, for her offence in perishing by her own act and deed. How, was she not driven to it? No, no, no! we are her murderers. Sir Thomas Holte, I, her mother, and Adam Blackjack, the master cook; we three are my poor child's murderers.'

'How strange, too, that after treating her the way I did—after overwhelming her with scorn, and hatred, and reproaches, after driving her and her infant shame with yells of reproach and curses from my doors, how strange that I should hear that splash—that screech—and yet not take to my understanding what had really occurred. Or was it—no, it could not be; it shall not be! I was not so steeled with my own supposed wrongs and injuries, and the disgrace the poor girl thus had brought upon me and my father's name, that knowing she was gurgling

in the deep water for her life, I yet would not stretch forth my hand to save her—till too late !

‘ But could I have saved her ? ’ the unhappy creature went on musing. ‘ Marry, I think not ; although she gave that cry, she was bent on dying ! And you cannot prevent people from dying that are bent upon it ; you cannot, I say ! Adam Blackjack only pretends I could have saved her, because the undying worm is at his own heart, too, in that, and he would ease some blame off himself on me. It was he drove her mad by his pretensions to become her husband ; by his revealing that Sir Thomas desired it. Cowardly slave ! It is his only comfort to feign now that after he had driven her frantic, her mother could have saved her merely by stretching out her hand, and—and would not !

‘ And they talk of the day of judgment as to be millions of ages hence, perchance, do they ? No, no ; judgment day is now—here ! Judgment day is over for me now for nigh these thirty years. And hell ! Is it not hell enough to remember that hour ? And my poor child’s white drenched face as they drew her from the pool, and her last cry, “ Mother, my child ! my child ! ” They say she plunged with it in her arms ; but how could that be, since I know very well she called out those very dying words, and he, Richard Grimsorwe, was found safe and sound among the osiers on the bank ? And for Adam to torment me on, by saying that her ghost is only troubled because her child was not allowed to be drowned with her, as she intended, but is left to do so much mischief and wickedness on the earth. For had he less cause for bitterness of heart, my grandson truly is a devilish man in his revenges and hates. Hillo, talk of the devil, and doth he really sometimes appear ? Who’s there ? Grandson, is it you ? ’

At this moment Maud Grimsorwe’s latch was clicked up, but, as she had secured the low door with a broad wooden bolt, the visitor could not enter.

Some interval of no reply ensued, and the old woman’s ‘ extravagant and erring spirit ’ thus pursued its cogitations :

‘ Or is it the Old One himself, then ? The Old One whom, they say, I serve, and who, for that, should do me favours in return. But what hath he ever done that I have begged of him ? Some of the children, it is true, perished ; but two goodly heirs survive to Thomas Holte, flourishing like the young pine and lady-birch of the woods. Hath he not a noble, youthful son, who obeys his will in all respects, who is to be married to a noble and wealthy wife ? A daughter, whose beauty has attracted the admiration of a Prince, and whom, they say, she is to marry ? Myself, I blessed them when I met them in the Waste, they looked so stately and proud a pair ; and yet a curse was in my heart.’

‘ So happy and fortunate is the man to whom I owe the misery of so many years. What folly, then, to talk—as the strange old scholar who was father of Esther Feldon, and parish clerk of Sutton so many years, often would—of familiars and demons that might, by proper devil’s prayers and incantations, be brought to do our will on others ! Yet he was a wise man, and taught me nigh all I know of my witchcraft, forsooth, in herbs and unguents. What, the bolt moves again. Who’s

there without? What want ye? I am making bedward, and it is time an old woman should when the owls begin their hooting.'

'Open the door, good Dame Grimsorwe; I am a Birmingham lass, come of an errand it shall do you no harm to hear, but put a piece of fine large white money in the palm of your hand,' replied a voice from the exterior, which sounded indeed like that of a female, but scarcely of the rank indicated by the expression and the lonely style of the visitation.

'What voice is that?' said the old woman to herself, considerably startled. 'But, no; it is not at all like Maud's; hers was always sweet, and sad, and low-toned as the warble of a water in the woods. What says it about money? Can some bold slut of the town have heard of what I am saving up, with so much toil and pains, to bury me, that in the very last I may owe no one on earth a kindness, and come to rob me? Go hence, I tell you; be you who you may be, Maud Grimsorwe is too weary to listen to women's long complaints to-night.'

'I have come too tiresome a trudge, and my business is too pressed, to go back without speech with you, old dame,' the voice replied, in impatient and even imperious accents. 'I will take your cat away from you if you will not let me in; and hark, do you not hear him mewling at the door?'

The witch's skeleton favourite in reality gave what probably sounded in her ears a very pathetic and moving appeal, in the form of a fearful waul, at this moment.

'Hussy, to dare to harm my cat! I'll let you know!' the old woman exclaimed, and, forgetful of her personal apprehensions, she arose and hobbled in high exasperation to the door.

Opening in a mingled quiver of anxiety and rage, Dame Grimsorwe found herself facing a female figure, in a long grey cloak and hood drawn nearly over her features, such as were worn in reality by women of inferior rank both in town and country, at the time, as a going-out dress. What was remarkable only was that besides this concealment, the visitant wore a vizard—a species of black canvas mask, used by females of much higher pretensions than those assumed to preserve their complexions on journeys, or conceal their features in places of public assemblage where they did not choose to be known. Yet Maud Grimsorwe was not a little struck by the distinguished appearance of her visitor in other respects, and the tone of command and superiority that seemed natural to her.

'Phœbe Dewsnap! You are not Phœbe Dewsnap, either!' the old woman exclaimed, strangely puzzled by what she saw.

'No, indeed. I am of Birmingham, I tell you. But, prithee, let an honest Christian woman in as well as your cat. See, good dame! I have not come to challenge a proof of your skill unprovided with a sufficient fee; and there are more where this comes from,' the visitor rejoined, displaying a silver coin of about the size and value of a crown-piece, called a noble.

Avarice was not one of the infirmities of age from which the Witch of Aston was exempt. The sight of the money proved a most potent smoothener of obstacles.

'Come in, my young madam, then,' she said, 'for so I am sure you are by your voice. But there are so many foolish wenches come to me from the town, who think I can and will cure them of all their troubles and ailments for nothing. Whereas I am a poor old woman myself, and want to save up all I can get to buy me a shroud and a coffin.'

'You seem not very rich indeed, good dame; and I marvel the more at that, since they report you, far and near, so very skilful and knowing in things, that some people report you have dealings with the other world;—say you are a witch, in short,' replied the visitor, but not by any means as if she meant to use the term reproachfully.

Maud Grimsorwe, however, seemed not greatly to relish it.

'They say so who would fain make a bonfire of a poor old woman's dry bones, and they lie. I know the virtues of some common herbs and simples, which I learned in a lawful Christian way of an old mediciner that once abode in these parts, and had all Sutton Chase for his apothecary's shop,' she replied, snappishly enough.

'Hush, hush, Dame Grimsorwe; do not think to hide the truth from me. I have heard of you almost all my life as a woman who had real power and dealings with supernatural agencies; I ask not of what sort—but, hark, your cat mews as if he, too, liked not your denial.'

The stranger said this in a rather playful manner, but yet with evident earnestness and belief at bottom; and Maud, whose eye was strongly attracted by the coin, perhaps thought it unadvisable to discredit her own capabilities of deserving recompense any further. She therefore contented herself with a doubtful mutter, concluding with a request to the 'Birmingham lass' to enter, take a seat at the fire, and state her wishes, as briefly as might be.

The stranger seemed to comply very willingly, and meanwhile, the cat continuing to mew and circulate rapidly round the old woman's feet, her attention was attracted to it.

Suddenly she uttered a doleful cry, 'Smilikin, Smilikin, Smilikin! what has done this to my bonny Smilikin?' she exclaimed, lifting the frightful animal in her arms. 'Some dog has bitten it, has torn its poor skin with its beastly fangs. My curse go with it, and its owners too, over the edge of the Beacon Barr!'

'Nay, do not say so; the creature cannot be much hurt; it ran before me nearly all the way,' said the stranger, evidently a good deal alarmed and perturbed by this manifestation.

'Its shoulder-blade is nigh bitten out by the sharp, narrow, cruel bite of a greyhound. There is but one runs at large hereabouts, and it belongs to the proud minx of Aston Hall,' the old woman now quite yelled.

'And do you curse her, old woman? You blessed her not many days ago,' the stranger-damsel replied, with angry vivacity.

'How know you that, *young* woman?' the Witch now fiercely rejoined, her grey eyes flashing fire on the speaker, and instinct with vengefully suspicious scrutiny.

'I am a great acquaintance of the young lady of Aston's maiden, Phoebe Dewsnap, and she told me so, good dame,' the visitor now rather sharply replied. 'But, boasting the skill you do, why not apply

your sanative ointments to the mangled vermin's wound? And what better can either you or it expect, if it goes prowling like a wild ounce or tiger in the woods?

'And would you have it stay at home with me always here, and famish? What food have I to give it, that have scarcely withal to satisfy my own toothless munchings? Oh, Smilikin, Smilikin, Smilikin! gnawed like a rat by the over-fed, pampered lady's hound, merely in sport and cruelty. When will the Holtes cease to do wrong on me and mine?'

'Even now, old woman, if you study to deserve it, and will swear secrecy to me on my business,' the stranger-visitant abruptly replied. 'I do confess that my hound—for I am Arabella Holte—which I could not rate from accompanying me, startled and chased your cat. But I saved it from his jaws, and severely reprimanded Prince home; a hound I like of as well as you can of your animal, certainly, for it is the gift of a King's son and nephew to me. But, why such a pother about the matter, and a working on of old grudges, when I tell you I have come to you with the best of feelings and purposes, to inquire out my fortune of you, and repay to the fullest the exercise of your skill?'

'You! You are Mistress Arabella Holte! Come to ask your fortune of—of Maud Grimsorwe, of a poor, wretched old woman like me?' exclaimed the Witch of Aston; and truly, in her astonishment, relinquishing even the examining and piecing up of her grimalkin's torn side.

'Yes, Dame Maud, and methinks it is time that I should know it now,' replied Arabella Holte, resuming her naturally haughty and commanding tones, though with an effort to seem lively and jesting. 'But no doubt you have heard of me, as I have of you, and are aware that I have refused numerous not unsuitable offers of marriage, as people deem them, that have been made to me. Indeed, I cannot well fix my mind on any, and would find out what fate inevitably has in store for me, to put my tossed and vacillating mind to some rest. Moreover, I make some kind folks, who perchance deserve a better fate' (this she said with a sigh), 'very unhappy by my undecidedness, and would end the trouble and contention in my own soul and theirs, by knowing what is written down in fate for me. And now, Phoebe Dewsnap, my handmaiden, tell me you predicted to her most truly that she should be wooed and won in wedded love by Robin Falconer.'

'What else was to be expected between a peasant and a waiting-maid, Mistress Holte?' the Witch replied, after an interval of astonished silence; 'and I saw them at their love-making as the blithe falconer made for home over these plantations, or when your mother's maidens came down to a linen-wash in the pool. But for your father's daughter to seek to know herself in such a manner, of my daughter's mother, passes belief.'

'Not at all, Dame Grimsorwe; why should I inherit those senseless old grievances? And I am well assured of your skill, for even my father himself espied you but very lately engaged in some magical divination, at a cross-road, with a dozen other of your kind, that all dispersed in lightning and thunder when he spake. Nay, but for your grandson's entreaties, and Adam Blackjack's fearful refusing to stand to

his witnessing, he would have given out his warrant that very night for your apprehension as a witch.'

'So my grandson told me. And for these kindnesses and courtesies, to say nothing on old scores—but what do you ask of me, Mistress Holte? I am old, young lady, very old, and scarcely took note what you have said.'

Miss Holte now repeated, in still clearer and more peremptory declaration, that she desired the Witch of Aston to show by some certain charm or spell what husband she was to wed.

Maud Grimsorwe was probably herself for some moments amazed at the credulity and craving desire to pry into the secrets of futurity that must have dictated this research. But the pride and sense of raised importance natural to a poor old, half-witted, grief-worn creature of the kind, took possession of her mind upon it, and dictated the reply she made.

'I can show you who your future husband is to be, Mistress Holte, if husband your pride and vanity ever suffer you to take among mortal men. Who your husband ought to be I leave to your own heart.'

'What mean you?' exclaimed Miss Holte, with a sudden pettishness that did not conceal the fact that she was struck with a kind of dismay on the words.

'I have eyes for blacksmiths as well as for gamekeepers, high-born ladies as well as their handmaidens, and I have seen what I have seen,' returned the Witch, as peevishly. 'Nay, I have my thoughts that it was because you spied my withered head over the yew tree in Aston churchyard that day when Tubal Bromycham implored of you to give him some definite answer to an oft-urged suit before, that you hastened with your own version of the tale to Sir Thomas Holte. As if I would have betrayed a love-making so much to my mind and so little to his!'

'You are not far wrong, perchance, in your conjecture, Maud; it was a madness, a frenzy, from which fear of my father's displeasure could alone so wonderfully have saved me. But it is long all over, now,' Miss Holte replied, and in tones of deeper emotion than she seemed willing to admit. 'How is it, then, that you will enable me to ascertain my real destiny in a husband, if, as you say, I ever am to wed?'

It is probable Maud herself only projected a humiliation and blow to the pride and hopes of the haughty beauty, her enemy's daughter. But she answered boldly, 'Cross my hand with silver thrice, lend me your best laced smock, and the first night the moon is at the full come hither to me, and I will have everything prepared for the experiment; which consists in this, that the fair garment is hung before a fire, magically prepared, over a shroud (which I have of mine own, convenient, for they would not let my girl wear the shroud I wrought her), and thereupon she that would know her fortune must watch till midnight. And when it strikes—be he far or near, east or west, at bed or banquet, or on battle-field—he that is destined for her husband must leave wherever else he is, and stalk, as it were in a dream, into the chamber, and turn the smock over the shroud, to show that he is hers for life and death, as married folks should be.'

Miss Holte listened with a singularly earnest anxiety, and yet belief,

in this strange statement, which only the extreme superstition of the times, and her own overwrought thirst for information on the point, influenced by recent occurrences, could at all have rendered reasonable. This was, nevertheless, one of the most established and favourite forms of marriage divination, in practice for many previous ages among the northern nations, especially in Scotland; and it still lingers, it is said, in divers outlying provinces of Germany and the Scandinavian peninsula.

'I will begin, then, at once, with the silver-crossing of the palm,' she said, eagerly taking out purse, and chinking coin after coin, to the number indicated, into the skinny, outstretched hand of the beldam. 'It will not be so easy, indeed, for me to be out of the Hall so late at night; but Phœbe and I, and perchance Robin Falconer, who is a good, faithful fellow, and as brave as a lion, will contrive it among us. And now, good-even, good old dame, for it is growing very dark as we speak, and I may be missed. When will be the first full moon at midnight for our spell?'

'I must draw the lines, and I will send you word, fair mistress! But did I bless you, say you, then, the other day? I bless you again now, the Witch exclaimed, delightedly clutching the money. 'What beautiful, beautiful broad pieces they are! But I must attend to poor Tomikiri now; hear how he mews again!'

'No doubt the imp is in pain with his rent skin,' said Miss Holte while the cat indeed renewed its excited wailings and movement around its mistress.

Unhappily, no one noticed the whining and snuffing of a dog at the door at the same moment, amid the cries and restlessness of the Witch's favourite. And Miss Holte, bestowing a renewed condescending and friendly farewell on Maud Grimsorwe, stepped heedlessly to the door of the cottage, opened it, and before the young lady could even discern how necessary her interposition was, Prince had darted in and re-seized his escaped victim, whose lamed limb and the narrowness of the chamber prevented it from flight. And while the old woman rushed shrieking to the fireplace for a broom-handle which served her for a poker, to be used in defence of her favourite, a catastrophe took place, and Smilikin or Tomikiri—he had a variety of witch pet-names—lay, with his head bitten almost from the neck, on the floor.

Most extraordinary it was to witness the really delirious rage and despair of the poor old wretch at this tragical ending of her sole companion and friend. Maud flew at the greyhound with such fury that age-worn and feeble as she had seemed the moment before, it did not appear impossible but that she might take ample vengeance in the way of laming and braining it. But the dog flew, howling with pain and terror, from the cottage, and its mistress, little less dismayed, followed it out, uttering apologies entirely unheeded by the excited and raving beldam.

Probably Arabella would have returned to endeavour to soothe the injured mistress of the unfortunate Smilikin; but when she reached the door, she almost stumbled upon the entering figure of Richard Grimsorwe, who said smilingly, as he passed, as if he really mistook the personage, 'What, pretty Phœbe Dewsnap here so after dark!'

CHAPTER LXX.

CONSPIRACY.

'I THINK the moon will be at the full to-night, by the almanack, Cornet Titus,' said Richard Grimsorwe to that officer, whom he found stalking sulkily up and down the terrace between the garden and the falconer's lodge, with his arm still in a sling.

It was about a week after the visit of Miss Holte to the cottage of his grandmother.

'Why do you make this remark to me, sir? Do you suppose that my intellects follow the ebb and flow of the moon, like some milkmaid's crazy for love?' Cornet Titus replied, with his characteristic sharpness and acrimony. 'Or do you presume upon making me your jest, on account of my being still disabled with the wound so hardly inflicted upon me by my royal captain for a drunken jest?'

'Not I, in good faith. I wear the garment of a man of peace, and not of war, and do not feel myself in the least encouraged to your provocation by the success of so perfect a master of his weapons as his Highness the Prince in your demolition. You would still, I think, prove too many for a poor lawyer with only your left arm,' replied Grimsorwe, jocosely. 'I made the remark with quite another intent, I do assure you, Cornet Titus, and not merely, either, as a puzzle to pass the time while his Highness dines; for it seems that neither you nor I are held good enough company at meals for such great personages as sit down daily now in Aston Hall.'

'Your birth disqualifies you for the placing of a gentleman, Master Grimsorwe, I am sorry to say. There is not a haughtier prince in the world than his Highness, as regards the pedigree of persons admitted to his society. And you are aware Miss Holte took occasion openly to declare on what reasons she disclaimed your calling her sister before him, while speaking of a grandmother you have, some poor old rubbishing cottager, who might almost thence have been inferred to be hers also, in some sort. As for me, I am too completely out of favour with that haughty girl herself, to expect the Prince to take me easily back into his,' Cornet Titus said.

'Indeed, his Highness seems fairly besotted with Mistress Holte, who is not my sister. But I marvel the less at it, being a lady of beauty so extraordinary, certainly, that nothing matches it but her pride and her ambition,' Grimsorwe replied, with singular virulence of insinuation. 'Or perhaps I ought to add also, the unrelenting character of her resentments, which, I dare promise you, Cornet, will wear out your hopes of promotion in the service of this Prince of yours, if ever she becomes his wife.'

'His wife!—Miss Holte the wife of Prince Rupert!—of the King's nephew!' exclaimed the Cornet, whose breath seemed almost taken at the bare idea.

'Why, what else deem you is aimed at here, among folks so proud and aspiring as the masters of Aston Hall are known to be?' replied Grimsorwe, affecting himself to look surprised,

'Why, you are all mad together, then, but to dream such madness ! Or if I thought there was any real fear in the matter, I would mount my horse at once, and ride, with or without leave, and at any further risk of displeasure, to his Majesty with the intelligence !' Cornet Titus now ejaculated, and in tones of the greatest indignation and alarm.

'And so ruin yourself, indeed, irrevocably with the Prince, and perhaps bring about the very catastrophe you would avoid,' exclaimed Grimsorwe.

'No, sir, I cannot deem so ; it is not possible ! You do not know the towering pride and exalted self-opinion of the Prince, if you deem it possible that he should think of marriage with the daughter of a mere English commoner. I know that he aspires to the hand of the King's daughter, the Princess Mary, when she shall be old enough to be espoused, and his services in this war shall seem to deserve the prize. And Count O'Taaffe has told me that his mother, the ex-Queen of Bohemia, has a thousand engines at work to try and patch up a reconciliation between the empire and him, which may probably require of him, on the other hand, to marry the Duke of Bavaria's daughter and turn Catholic, to secure a restoration of his Palatinate of the Rhine.'

'All these fine projects may, however, speedily come to nothing, and the fortunes of all who depend upon the Prince's rising, unless things are looked to in time,' Grimsorwe replied. 'Or, if not so, it becomes more than ever my duty to endeavour to save this rash and obstinate girl—sister though she will not let us style her—from a most dangerous entanglement. Moreover, I could be glad, methinks, to relieve his Highness from the exceedingly uncomfortable position in which he will speedily find himself with so choleric a gentleman as my father, though he very properly refuses to relax his rules respecting persons of my unhappy birth. All this may be done without exciting any reasonable offence, and, by your assistance, Cornet, in a way which shall restore you to more than your forfeited favour, and by a very simple means.'

'Pray you, make me master of the talisman ; I will let no grass grow under my heels in bringing about so notable a combination of desirable things,' said Cornet Titus, very eagerly.

'Communicate, then, to his Highness—and it was therefore I alluded just now to the quartering of the moon—that Miss Holte is going to consult a witch to-night as to who is to be her future husband, by a most peculiar process of divination, which I will describe to you anon, in hopes that it may prove his Highness, and so encourage her in her plans to his enthrallment. It is all, of course, a foolish country superstition, but may be used as a means of disabusing *my sister* (if for once again I may call her so) of her high-reaching inflation. I would have you, therefore, mention the affair to his Highness, and suggest that he should go to the scene of enchantment, as if under some phantom spell of the old silly mumbling hag who is to perform the incantation, and plainly indicate, by a refusal to execute what they desire of him, that he has no such intentions as folks are growing fast to ascribe to him at Aston Hall.'

'A witch ! a spell ! an enchantment ! Marry ! what manner of a good old song is this you are singing me ?' exclaimed Cornet Titus, who

belonged to a then rare but existent school of illuminati, which rejected the supernatural altogether as either old wives' tales, or artfully-contrived stuff to deceive and terrify the masses of the people into subjection.

Grimsorwe explained that he had accidentally become acquainted with Miss Holte's arrangement with the old witch-woman of Aston, through the latter being exasperated into betraying the secret by a favourite cat of hers being worried by a dog of the young lady's, which she had taken with her on her visit. Moreover, the pretended sorceress was the doating old cottager, *his* relative, whom his owning of such had been so rudely and unreasonably taken up by Arabella Holte. And having a very proper dread of falling under the condemnation of the laws for anything savouring of actual witchcraft, this ancient kinswoman mostly consulted him upon what she might do to turn an honest penny in that way, without incurring the grievous penalties of witchcraft. But, alarmed at a transaction which might easily be construed to fall under that description of felony, Grimsorwe desired, he stated, to let the whole affair pass into the harmless domain of practical joking, in case any discovery should be made.

But that, he added, was not much to be feared, as the appointed scene was in a very lonely hut, at a long distance from the Hall; the hour midnight. And stipulations might easily be made to prevent Miss Holte being encumbered by any close attendance of servants, or others, to the place of meeting.

These latter statements seemed most particularly to strike Cornet Titus, especially as their significance lay a great deal more in the peculiar accent and glances of the betrayer than his words, which only we are enabled to convey to the reader. Titus's pert and malicious physiognomy also lighted up with some reflection, if not of the fiendish malignancy, of the evil intuition, mingled with libertine gaiety, of the thought that occurred to him.

Revenge, and the prospect of retrieving the Prince's favour by procuring him a form of extrication from what his own excited passions were probably fast rendering a most dangerous complication—all to be suggested and achieved in the guise of a jest on a young girl's folly of credulity, which yet revealed the earnestness and eager advancement of her hopes, and an old witch beldam's knavery. These were rich materials for the audacious and unscrupulous Cornet's wit and contrivance to bring to the catastrophe contemplated, without remorse or a shadow of relenting on the part of the arch-conspirator Grimsorwe.

Before they parted, Grimsorwe was thoroughly convinced he could not have put the working of his plot against the honour and ambitious hopes of the woman who had refused to be called his sister, in better—that is, in worse—hands than those of this heartless and revengeful libertine youth, the future author of the atrocious incentive to Cromwell's assassination, styled 'Killing no Murder.'

CHAPTER LXXI.

TENDER AND TRUE.

DURING the interval thus spent at Aston Hall, things in Birmingham seemed, in most external aspects, relapsing into their former quiet state.

The disturbance caused by Cromwell's stormy passage appeared to pass away like the agitated movement of a deep water when a stone is cast into it, that speedily sinks to the bottom.

The artisan population of the town, as a general fact, moved only by the impulse of its chiefs, who appeared to be satisfied with the kind of peace patched up between Birmingham and the King. And this feeling continued, although it was known that the main condition of the arrangement made on the part of the town, had not been complied with.

Armourer Firebrace, it is true, made an earnest attempt at the Guild-hall to induce his fellow-rulers to repudiate the whole agreement, in consequence. But he was unsuccessful, from various causes; among which must be reckoned the violent and domineering tone he adopted, that in itself strongly indisposed his hearers to acquiesce, and this was no longer backed by any visible force or flow of popular feeling. The really energetic and determined fanatic minority in the town held itself aloof from all share in what was happening now. And meanwhile, the restoration of trade, and the cheerful blazing of their forges, restored both masters and workpeople to good humour. While if the gathering strength of the Cavaliers at Aston excited remark and alarm, these were rather reasons with most folks to shun a revival of provocation towards an enemy growing so capable of making his resentment felt.

Perhaps, however, the true reasons of this quieting down must be sought in the lack of agencies to sustain the impulse Birmingham had received from without.

Firebrace's authority, unbacked by personal qualities of the fierce activity required, exercised no great influence. Major Monk declined all interference; and though he still remained in the town, and sent up to the Parliament a full account of what had happened, requesting instructions, he had not the power, if even he had the will, to hinder anything that was done. The enthusiast newly-elected pastor of Birmingham was, indeed, engaged in certain mysterious preparations to celebrate his induction to his office, but nothing had as yet happened in consequence. But, above all, the great stirring spirit of the town, Tubal Bromycham, seemed to have sunk into a singular lull of apathy and indifference.

Tubal resided at the Moat-House, but in a remarkable condition of isolation and gloom, only forcing himself from his seclusion at intervals to countenance Dorothy Firebrace's evasions from her father's suspicious supervision.

But this also, it began to appear, was becoming irksome and dissatisfactory to Tubal Bromycham. He did not, of course, comprehend the true position of his former betrothed and Edward Holte, all the parties

to the transaction considering it due to one another, and the preservation of the secret, not to confide it even to him. His impulsive nature was known ; and Edward, who had felt obliged to warn him of the little hope there was of removing in his favour the obstacles to his love which existed in the pride and ambition of its object, dared not venture on letting him perceive how completely even a Holte could yield to the influence of the passion.

There might well, therefore, have been much which in all his absolute and heroic simplicity of brotherly trust in Edward's honour and integrity, troubled Tubal in the kind efforts he yet continued, to make other lovers happier than there seemed any possibility he should ever be himself. It came to his heart sometimes with a vivid pang, that unless Edward Holte possessed all the chivalry and generosity of sentiment he ascribed to him, he was aiding in a terrible deception, fraught with disgrace and ruin to the persons most dear to him, and honoured of man and womankind, saving only one dearer than all, more honoured than all, in the impassioned idolatry of his poet and artist nature.

Yet here, too, in all that concerned his own hopes and affections, Tubal was condemned by the combination of circumstances to the most unhappy condition the faculties of the human mind and heart can be subjected to ; when we feel that a fate of intolerable calamity, as regards the most vital and suffering principles of both, is falling upon us, without our having the smallest imaginable power of prevention or cure.

From the very first the arrival of Prince Rupert at Aston Hall, and his abode there, had filled Tubal with the most poignant apprehensions, awakened the most venomous gnawings of the cruel passion which darts its poison most into its victim's entrails, and too often coils there in a more thickly-rankling nest with every hour's sojourn.

Jealousy is perhaps only a master-passion in natures which are at the same time the most powerfully organised and the most modest and diffident of their own powers. Tubal's glorifying and yet profoundly venerating imagination, which had conferred the most splendid lustre of idealism on the object of his passion, deprived himself of any confidence in his merits and abilities to deserve so transcendent a prize.

It heightened to him all the supremacy of attraction Arabella Holte in reality possessed, to make him certain that the Prince, rude soldier as he was described to be, could not possibly escape the fascination. And then, what was to come of that !

Tubal, who would joyfully have laid the crown of an emperor at the feet of Arabella Holte, never in the least doubted that, however haughty by birth and prejudice, the exiled Palatine could have no hesitation to prostrate himself, with his sword of a soldier of fortune, at the feet of the glorious daughter of Sir Thomas Holte. And that she would accept so high a destiny, in some respects, Tubal's own melancholy experience of her vanity, and aspiring scorn of all beneath her, independently of Edward Holte's sorrowful admissions of the probability, now tormentingly suggested the certainty.

No wonder, then, that the Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham remained most miserable and hopelessly inactive in the midst of his vainly-recovered inheritance.

What is success, even if great and assured? what are power and wealth, and the homage of the world, always paid to these, when the heart looks into itself, and finds all empty, voiceless, unsatisfied there? Ah me!—

‘What is the costliest banquet
To one sick at heart with death?’

But even the calm of utter hopelessness, of despair, which some will have it must needs be the death of love, was denied to Tubal Bromycham.

When he reflected on the past, he could not force himself to believe that he had been all along mistaken, all along an object of the utter indifference, even aversion, Arabella Holte now certainly exhibited towards him.

The tenderness and compassion which had so often shone through all the brilliant gaiety and coquetry of her glance, the admiration she had evinced for his talents, the brief but intoxicating intervals in which she had seemed to yield to some overmastering sentiment on her own part, however restrained by caution and pride—every minute recollection of these moments of delight and hope, however scantily spread over a considerable lapse of time, forbid Tubal to take refuge in that death of complete hopelessness, which, after all, is a conscious one, and as little to be sought and desired as the advantage of being *buried alive*.

Even Dame Cooper took into compassion at last this unhappy tenant, as she considered him still, of the Moat-House, though she took care not to trouble the bliss of *her* lovers by any dreary allusions to what was happening elsewhere, in their presence.

Perhaps she had a notion that, however curiously he lent himself to be deceived, Tubal Bromycham was not quite satisfied to resign his betrothed, on the suspicions of her affections being engaged to another. So Dorothy thought it enough to assure her. And the good dame, who had several soft corners in her heart, as became a townswoman of gentle Willie, began at last to make the supposed discarded suitor an object of compassionate attention and looking after.

This, however, did not seem to improve the situation for Tubal, who speedily found Mistress Cooper's kindness irksome, and desired to escape from it. Or else the deadly stillness and silence became too insupportable to him, of the species of suspense to which he was condemned when Edward Holte admitted to him, that in consequence of an angry discussion on the subject of his sister and the Prince, he had been discharged from learning the news at Aston Hall.

He grew, accordingly, to addict himself to long absences from home. And yet he very rarely now appeared in the streets of Birmingham; never at the forges where he had spent so many laborious but happy days of his still young existence.

Neither was he ever reported to have been at Sutton, though Edward Holte frequently invited and pressed him to make a visit there. And to heighten the mystery, these absences were often prolonged deeply into the night; insomuch that Dame Cooper took it at last into her head Tubal Bromycham must have betaken himself for consolation to some

remote sweethearting—perhaps in some part of his native collier wilds about Walhall or Wolverhampton.

Very few people, even in an age still so remote from the unromantic materialism of our own, would have conjectured the real objects and localities of Tubal's wanderings. Who would have dreamed that, instigated by the earnest desire that possessed him to behold again, however distantly, under whatever disastrous accompaniments, the object of his passion, the chief of the Birmingham sedition ventured by night and stealth into the very midst of his armed and exasperated enemies, whose outposts stretched all around Aston Hall.

There was little reason to expect that the species of unratified truce between the people of Birmingham and the King's troopers would have availed to protect Tubal, had he been discovered in these wild wanderings. The impetuous and savage determination of Prince Rupert's style of making war, imported from continental practice, was beginning to be well appreciated in England; and under the circumstances it would be perfectly easy to suppose a spy in Tubal, who ought to be made to suffer the penalties of one.

Nevertheless he defied this formidable danger, on the mere hope of being enabled to catch the most remote glimpse of the slighting and apparently alienated goddess-illusion of his own love and genius, but which to his eyes seemed a reality—a celestial of beauty and superiority; persuading himself perhaps, at the same time, that he only desired to discover some fact upon which his tormented mind might rest, however fatal to its peace.

Tubal's intimate acquaintance with the whole district around Aston certainly stood him in good stead on these occasions, and secured him against the worst part of the dangers to be apprehended.

He knew every line of approach to Aston Hall; what shelter and hiding-places in wood and dell, behind hedge or in ditch, on the summits of lofty trees, or in the sedgy skirts of hidden pools, there were around. Former restless love-wanderings had made him familiar with these, and in great measure had obtained him his reputation of a poacher on Sir Thomas's grounds, due mainly to the exploits of others.

From one of those higher observatories alluded to he watched where the lines of sentries were drawn, and avoided them by skilful windings.

The dogs in the villages and outlying farmhouses mostly recognised him as a friend, and seldom barked as he passed near their points of vigilance. The ferocious bull of Aston itself, had they met, bore in recollection a terrible cudgelling it had received at the strong blacksmith's hands, and would probably have shunned an encounter. Yet the reward of all this perilous adventuring was little indeed to any calm and rational consideration.

Tubal had grown familiar with the powerful figure of his rival, his stern rough manners in command, and had espied him once or twice, from the leafy summit of an oak, putting his squadrons through their evolutions in the midst of the Park, with a fair spectatress looking on, whose smiles and wreathing affabilities set every fibre in his hardy and yet sensitive frame palpitating with rage and agony. At nightfall, when the household at Aston Hall retired to rest, he was at liberty to watch

one particular window at his leisure, and figure to himself the fair occupant, until the glowing lamp was extinguished, and he was left to the desolation of the silent woods and midnight stars.

But still the fever that preyed on Tubal's heart seemed somewhat allayed and comforted by the restlessness of these movements, and the occasional glimpses of better hopes, which would at times—he knew not why—seem to visit him on some air that blew from Aston Hall.

On a particular occasion, we are now to mention, this vague but overmastering spirit of wandering research came with unusual force upon Tubal Bromycham, in his home at the Moat-House, in Birmingham.

There he occupied a chamber which resembled that of Don Quixote as much as anything else, since it was full of old books and pieces of armour, with the exception that the latter were very modern (then) and bright.

Here Tubal laboured, when he could bring himself to attend to anything, at what he considered the proper accomplishments of a gentleman of his lineage. He strove hard to master the contents of divers antique tomes he found in the worm-eaten library of the place, and practised the tricks and feints of broadsword exercise which Cromwell, who hardly knew them himself at the time, had taken considerable pains to instruct him in.

It is not said that the moon has much influence over the minds or physical powers of the male sex, though astrologers are pleased to ascribe the greatest to that planet over the moods and inclinations of women. Men have placed themselves, in their calculations of the kind, under the nobler and steadier solar sway. Nevertheless, it was the full moon this night when Tubal Bromycham was visited by a not unusual longing with him certainly, to quit the town and wander in the open lands round Aston Hall, undeterred by the fact that the rounded effulgence was all the likelier to betray his daring to eyes he could least desire to discern it.

It may be indeed, the case being so, more irresistibly worked on the desperation of the feelings that mostly urged him forth on these excursions. There was something tempting to the fate-defying mood of a hopeless lover in the very certainty of added danger and possibilities of an ending for life and misery together. Something, perhaps, even of a strange joy, such as a subtle but strong denizen of the wilds might feel at braving the dangers of a near approach to the habitations of man, in quest of forbidden luxuries of prey.

Or could it have been that some divine instinct of the heart summoned Tubal Bromycham forth into Aston plantations that full-moon night and hour?

CHAPTER LXXII.

‘ANY FORM BUT HIS OWN.’

CORNET TITUS had meanwhile executed, and more than executed, his appointed part in the work.

It was usual for Prince Rupert's officers to attend him the last thing at night in his chamber, when he retired from the plentiful joys of the table, and the homage that surrounded him at Aston Hall, to deliver their reports for the day and receive orders for the morning; and this was often, as on a former recorded occasion, made the pretence for a renewed conviviality, ending in the rude fashion of the day, in a regular drinking bout.

There was no need of any addition to the bacchanal enjoyments of the evening in question. The Prince was a German campaigner in all his habits at this period, whatever future refining influences the progress of age and reflection, the sorrows and poverty of exile, might afterwards render him. He was the pupil, in more than military respects, of the ferociously jolly and licentious soldier of Tilly and Wallenstein, Count O'Taase. He had, therefore, done his full duty to the rich wines Sir Thomas Holte's profuse hospitality had placed before him, and in the consumption of which the latter was as well qualified to play second to no man as any other robust English squire of his time.

Perhaps even the two men, scarcely consciously to themselves, made extremely uneasy by a similar cause, strove to dispel or drown an idea that annoyed both, by the profuse libations they urged upon each other.

Sir Thomas Holte began to be aware that he could scarcely pretend much longer to ignore the fervour and intention of the Prince's demeanour towards his daughter. The Prince himself, unused to the analysis of his feelings or motives, and following mostly with little consideration the impulses of his coarse and vehement passions, nevertheless began to be annoyed and startled into the perception of the realities of the position in which he was involving himself, from various enlightening circumstances.

Among these must be reckoned the Baronet's growing plainness of insinuation, though consisting chiefly in vaunting details of his own wealth and grandeur—the services he intended to render the Crown—the honours he expected in return—the splendid genealogy he could prove, if need were, and alliances, past and at hand, with the most distinguished families of the country; including, of course, his son Edward's fine approaching match with the heiress of the Lord-Keeper Lyttelton.

Rupert heard these statements for the most part with impatience, or a species of acquiescence which is said to be more dispiriting to our missionaries in India, and other idol-ridden nations, than any amount of counter-argument.

When the former deduce arguments in favour of the Christian religion from the miracles which attended its manifestation, the intended converts, calm in the possession of their own prodigious mythology, admit everything, but ask, 'Is that all?' So with Rupert, who believed himself descended through we know not what all of dukes, and counts, and margraves, and kings, from Charlemagne? What could there be imposing or attractive in the fact to him that his host was connected by blood or marriage with some two or three English earls or squires of great possession in the county of Warwickshire!

If Sir Thomas Holte's drift could have eluded so blunt and pride-possessed a Prince Palatine's perception, still he might have read some-

thing in the silent melancholy of disapprobation with which my Lady Holte watched her daughter's manœuvres on the occasion. For, certainly, Arabella Holte seemed bent on displaying all her powers of fascination on her admirer now, and succeeded plainly but too well. However much his suspicions, and, probably, inner convictions of the danger he was rushing into, might work on the Prince's mind, he was of too early and genuine a type of rude warrior manhood not to yield easily to displays of female cajolery, which he was so little accustomed to understand or withstand.

In these various moods the company at Aston Hall at last broke up, and with such an extravagant mark of homage on the Prince's part, who knelt to kiss Arabella's hand, that Sir Thomas Holte calculated almost with certainty his Highness was about to make the desired declaration of his feelings and purposes.

The baronet usually conducted his royal guest from the table to his suite of chambers, and he did so on this occasion. Yet, still to his great disappointment, not a word of the kind he expected was uttered, and Rupert more than once yawned when his host detained him before an emblazoned window in the hall, to explain the quarterings by the aid of the strong moonlight streaming on the panes. In truth, Richard Grim-sorwe had already spoilt the effect of the exhibition, by smilingly declaring that they ought to have an anvil and hammer in every lozenge, if they did proper justice to the family motto, *Exaltavit humiles*. As for the squirrel cracking nuts, it did not, in his opinion, at all express the idea; 'for though the creature climbed high, it was *only* to crack nuts.'

On the whole, the Palatine was in no very agreeable humour for an unwelcome suitor, when Cornet Titus stepped from the circle of his officers and asked leave to speak with his Highness for a few minutes in private, on an important observation he stated he had made on a recent round of his guard at the Hall, which ought to be at present reserved from general communication.

'Military intelligence can matter little, sir,' the Prince replied, testily, 'as long as Count O'Taaffe continues absent at Court, and the civilian wrongheads around his Majesty withhold him from following my advice respecting these mechanical rebels, and his own better judgment in the case. Besides, I am so weary to-night, methinks I could contentedly sleep in my boots; but whether with the good Sir Thomas's wine or talk the most, I scarce can tell.'

Titus, however, very earnestly and significantly renewed his request, with a statement that the granting of it nearly concerned his Highness's personal comfort and safety.

The Prince smiled scornfully.

'My personal comfort is even too well attended to here, Cornet Titus,' he remarked: 'and for my safety, I hold that pretty amply provided for against a town rabble, even of gunsmiths and sword-makers, by night or by day. Cry you mercy, and leave me to my nightcap.'

But Cornet Titus, who had decided on his course of action with characteristic contrivance and craft, rejoined in a manner that excited the Royal Dragon's attention.

'Such foes as I purpose to warn your Highness against do indeed

rather work by night than by day, but by no such tangible weapons of warfare as may be guarded against with the like. I do request your Highness's indulgence as I have said.'

'Does Cornet Titus, then, begin to believe in supernatural warnings?' returned Rupert, who was as well aware of his officer's incredulity as his officer was of the tendency of his own mind to the mysticism and exaltation of fancy which in almost all ages have been characteristic of the German mind. Natural products, it may be, of the stormy and gloomy latitudes in which the German mind has chiefly displayed any marked activity.

Titus was quite well aware that it would never do for him to make his suggestions in the manner doubtless intended by Grimsorwe, who did not so well understand the personage dealt with. He had adopted a different route to the same object.

'I have begun to do so, sir, on your behalf,' said the Cornet, gravely; and his unusual tone, and a well-acted semblance of disquiet and alarm sent over his wontedly impudently jeering physiognomy, produced some effect on the Prince.

'We shall hear just now that Cornet Titus has seen this same Wehr-wolf, or rather Wild Man of the Woods, which Provost-Marshal Storcks pretends to have spied when he went the other morning to St. Thomas's plantations for the materials of his new gallows. Or have you also seen the grimly ghost of the Duke of Friedland, which, they say, sometimes haunts poor O'Taafé for the share he took in leaving Prague citadel gates open to the Emperor's assassins? But any way, you say the communication is to myself alone? Leave us so, gentlemen; I dare confide in the Cornet's broken arm as well as his good intents, that he means me no unhandsome retaliation, or Wallenstein maltreatment, in the affair?'

The Prince expressing himself to this effect, the rest of his officers retired, and Titus was left to use his opportunity—not, certainly, unstimulated by resentment at this last unflattering hint.

Of course he dissembled his real emotion, and started with a preamble to a very different effect, and yet one that at first greatly roused Rupert's easily kindled indignation.

The Cornet boldly affirmed that the wound he had so deservedly received at his Highness's hands had only quickened his zeal in his service, since it was an unexampled honour to receive such in a fair man-to-man encounter with a Royal Prince—an honour, for his own part, he should never have dreamed of accepting, had it not been thrust upon him at such hard alternatives as were offered him, and, moreover, being at the time scarcely restored to a true sense of things from the liquor which had been the occasion of the whole. But, whatever malice might be imputed to him in the affair, instead of the love and duty he professed, he could not stand by and see his Highness made the victim of *witchcraft*, and all manner of devilish spells and incantations, without endeavouring, at all events, to put him on his guard.

The general credulity of the age, scarcely conceivable in our own by persons of education and enlightenment, but still to be found among large classes of the people, must be taken into account in estimating the

effect of this observation on Prince Rupert. It was but a score years removed from the time when his grandfather, James the First, penned his great book on Demonology, and passed his severe laws against the practice of magical arts and sorceries of unnumbered species ; and at the very time Hopkins the witchfinder was beginning his career of extrajudicial murder, under the same imaginary convictions, and the authority of the Puritan Parliament and the most celebrated divines of the persuasion.

The Prince looked at Titus with startled surprise, and even—dauntless soldier as he always showed himself on the field—alarm at the words ; then demanded explanation, in a style that truly left no room for hesitation. On the other hand, Cornet Titus, with a gravity that was very unusual with him, but served him similarly to Iago's settled habits of sober enunciation, stated to the Prince in reply, that in the course of his military rounds on the previous day, in Aston Park, a withered old beldam had presented herself before him, and offered to tell him his fortune for the smallest possible crossing of silver. And on his refusal of the offer, on the score of his disbelief in her power, had burst forth into an angry declaration that her skill gave her the means, not only to foretell, but to bring events to pass, in the fortunes of the greatest princes and lords, *as she had proved by bewitching the royal soldier staying then at Aston Hall, whom she had enthralled and subdued into such love for the fair daughter of Sir Thomas Holte, that he was inclined to give up all his prospects of glorious elevation and retrieval of his ancestors' rank, as sovereign princes on the Rhine, for the sake of her love !*

This was a desperate venture, a deep dive into the secrets of the haughty Palatine's soul, which nothing but the mingled impudence and audacious spirit of research of Cornet Titus could have dictated.

Yet it succeeded. Rupert himself—the man of blows and violence—shuddered like one stricken with a truly awful conviction of the reality of what he heard, as he ejaculated, 'That is true enough, indeed ! There have been moments when I have dreamed it possible ; for it is *not* possible to think that on any other terms the daughter of Sir Thomas Holte, who seems to fancy himself fully the equal of princes, on the strength of some poor half-dozen quartering of arms, 'tis true. I have often of late been driven to the belief there *was* some spell upon me—some wicked witchcraft spell ! Else, why should I desire to remain here when I know that either my own ruin or that of this most beautiful and stately girl and her proud father— But how dare they—why should they use *witchcraft* on me ?'

'Nay, I say not who uses it ; I shall never again say half a word anything to the disparagement of Sir Thomas Holte,' replied Cornet Titus, shrugging his wounded arm with a gesture of pain. 'Still, were I your Highness, I would not be made the joke and practice of these people, if it be so as I learn. If the young lady had won you by magic of her charms, that would have been fair play even for a Prince's enslavement—quite another matter. But that they should make you the fool and delusion of a horrible piece of witchery, methought it did consist in no-wise with my unchanged duty to your Highness to suffer. And it is most certain ; for when, as you will think likely of me, I showed the

old Circe that I put no belief whatever in her words, she offered me the proof—that on this very night, at the full of the moon, she would compel you—*compel* was her word—to leave your comfortable chamber and retirement, and make resort to her miserable hut, there to perform a ceremony quite as irreparable, quite as fatal to your return to your proper princely, even kingly rank—to your favour with your Royal uncle—to the good-will and blessing of your illustrious mother, who is trying so many devices to restore you to your exalted rights in the empire, as if you had in reality married yourself with this artful descendant of a fortunate smith of Birmingham.

Rupert actually grew deadly pale, and his strong, brassy tones quivered as he inquired what devil's sacrament this could be, which he should thus be drawn against his will to take, of so binding an efficacy.

Titus thought it now the proper place and time to declare to the superstitious German the particulars of the magic rite proposed to be celebrated, as Richard Grimsorwe had stated them to him. But, willing to keep all the merit of the disclosure to himself, and for other reasons, he suppressed that worthy's share in the matter throughout. And it was true that he had what the Americans call *prospected* the ground, and had an interview with the old woman in her cottage. But no such communication as he announced had passed between them. On the contrary, Maud had exhibited herself singularly sullenly and unwelcomely towards the impertinent military stranger, and had continued her occupation—which was the strange one of stuffing a dead cat—for the most part as if unconscious of his presence, or replying to his questions only with mutterings of dotage.

Nevertheless, in answer to the Prince's inquiry how he had acquired his information from a person who had so many motives to conceal it, Titus did not scruple to declare that he extorted the secret from the old woman by threats, on the one hand, of having her seized and put to the torture to confess, and promising, on the other, not to divulge the secret to her harm.

Rupert's panic alarm continued, but it was accompanied also by the most violent indignation.

'If their spells really have the power upon me the Holtes opine, know they not the only remedy for those who are drawn into any such horrible Sabbath is to draw their swords in the name of God, and hack and hew at the devils and sorcerers without stint or mercy, till of themselves they gladly release the inveigled one?' he exclaimed. 'It was thus that the good knight Conrad of Stolzenfels, who was carried off by a witch who loved him to the Blockula, disguised as a coal-black mare, struck off its head midway, and the same moment and hour the wife of his chief huntsman was found in her bed with her head severed from the shoulders, as with the stroke of an executioner's axe.'

Titus ventured a sly smile at this legend, which he probably thought admitted of interpretation without crediting the supernatural part of the tale too much.

And such a tragical effect was by no means the one he wished the affair to result in. 'Were I your Highness,' he remarked, 'I would take another guise revenge than so—a much pleasanter one than sabreing the

skull from an old witch's backbone, where 'tis ten to one it would only drop down again as ugly as ever.'

'How say you? What would you do, Cornet? I would O'Taafe were here to counsel me!' said the Prince, in vexed perplexity, staring at his truly base and mocking Mephistophelean adviser with a mixture of anger and expectation.

It was now the crafty Titus's aim to give a new turn to the whole wicked instilment.

He burst into a laugh. 'My Prince,' he said, 'notwithstanding the gravity with which I have related the whole affair, your Highness is aware I attach no manner of belief to such old wives' leasings and inventions. 'Tis but in truth a worthless old woman thinking to cheat a young one out of a few pieces of silver. But your Highness is none the less injured by the likelihood that the wrong purposed is out of human power and agency. And yet, methinks, the punishment were ample if you mortified the pride of Mistress Holte by stalking in, as in obedience to the spell, and solemnly shaking your head in refusal of the ceremonial by which she would think to bind you sacredly her own. Then, should she be very cross and pettish, your Highness might ask her pardon in the manner you lovers best know how. And which you well may, without dread of interruption or discovery, for the Witch's cottage is in a very desolate place, remote from the Hall. A string of our sentries surround the spot; the hour will be midnight. And, of a surety, Mademoiselle has shown such forwardness and passion to win your notice, that it may well and fairly be permitted to your Highness to believe she loves you enough to pardon what loving offence you might be led by circumstances to offer.'

This last view of the affair seemed greatly to tranquillise as well as please the Prince.

'Deem you this may be so, Titus?' he said, with a sigh of great relief. 'Why in very truth, I should owe Mistress Holte some chastisement for dragging me by spells and evocations from my quiet sleep. And if, when she sees that I in nowise project destroying all my own hopes to gratify her pride, she does not yet drive me from her presence with scorn and indignation, the presumptions will be fairly as you raise them, nor can any honourable man then rate me for breach of the laws of hospitality, and the good faith due to the roof that shelters us. Yet I would O'Taafe were here to counsel me, so experienced as he is in all points of honour and observances among soldiers and men of degree!'

'O'Taafe would counsel no otherwise in this instance, sir. I have espied him out already making love to Mistress Holte's waiting wench; and when I laughed with him upon a box of the ear he received for his pains, he would have it he was only trying to win the girl over to serve your interests with her young lady,' the Cornet replied.

'Ay, and to deal in witchcraft against me! But I would fain discover whether there be magic in it, by making my resolve not to go to the place, if I can hinder me,' said the Prince.

'Why, then, you will be taken on the whirl of a wind through the air, instead of safely guided on the good solid earth by your poor servant, to the rendezvous; and those who go against their will to a witch-

meeting, 'tis but reasonable to suppose they can exercise none there, and Heaven knows what follies your Highness may be led to commit.'

Rupert reasoned within himself for some moments, not very clearly or logically, it is probable, after all the wine he had drunk, and the confusion of mind into which he was purposely thrown. No doubt, also, the influence of the real enchantress's recent spells worked powerfully in conjunction with the other motives urged upon him.

The ill result of his meditations appeared in the words, 'I will go, then, of my own free will, under your guidance, Cornet, well armed against either fiends or men. And do you take your trumpet to summon further assistance, if we should be in need.'

Titus, smilingly, assured his Prince of his devotion in this respect to his interests.

'I can waken the dead with my blast on the bugle, although unhappily my sword-arm still continues too painful and disabled for much use. But it will still be some time ere we need be afoot, for the moon lacks yet more than an hour of the full.'

CHAPTER LXXIII.

GOOD SPIRITS AND BAD.

IN reality, any one who could have looked into the interior of Maud Grimsorwe's cottage, during the very time of this conference, might well have believed that something diabolically mysterious and fateful was in progress.

An enormous fire, heaped almost as high as the chimney would bear, but burning without flame or smoke—in reality a charcoal fire—glowed on the hearth, and diffused a lurid glow over the entire chamber. You would have thought everything in it was red hot; even the tattered furniture of the crazy bedstead seemed to flutter in flames, in the strong draught that entered at a half-open door. The rafters and thatched roof were so illuminated into relief, that you could espy the innumerable spider-webs that overhung them, with their swollen hunch-backed tenants, magnified by the glaring relief into creatures of an enormous toad-like size and squat.

Before this fire there was placed a large iron triangle, on its apex, though it was not easy to discern by what means the instrument was kept upright and fixed. Probably by an iron rod, forming part of it, driven well into the earthen floor.

This triangle cast a shadow of nearly double its size, large enough for a man on horseback to have stood in it.

On one side of the shadow, apparently basking with enjoyment in the intense heat, and crouching as near to it as possible, sat Maud Grimsorwe on her stool, with her lean, veiny hands raised a little to shade her withered visage from the glare.

On the other, as deeply as he could get into the shade of the low angle-corner, stood a figure that might well have been taken for an infernal presence already—the figure of Richard Grimsorwe in his black

lawyer's robes, and with his evil countenance resembling a mask of red-hot bronze, in the distortion produced by the mingled effects of his own malignant passions and the reflection of the fiery heap before him.

He had apparently but just arrived.

'It is wearing into a very wild and windy night, granny,' he was observing. 'But all is going well with us in other respects. It is even better that the moon should be clouded over so frequently as she is. And you seem to have everything here in a good readiness.'

'Everything,' repeated the old woman mechanically, and as if she scarcely heard either her own answer or what was said to her.

'Nicely swept and littered,' he resumed, looking round with satisfaction; 'you have not spared the sweet essences I gave you, as I desired, and the fumigating pot for the Devil's Mass you are to celebrate, grandam, is well stored with intoxicating and bewildering drugs of the East, which will not fail to produce their effect. But why have you placed yonder frightful object so much in sight? I would not have that! I would have the whole hovel glow in their enchanted sight like a bower of roses—and that frightful, grinning, stuffed beast set there!'

'How, Dickon, Dickon, what say you? Would you deprive me even of poor Smilikin's stuffed skin?' exclaimed the witch, glaring up now with both light and intelligence in her eyes, and clutching the lawyer back by his robe, from a reach he was making, with unexpected strength. 'Fool! I placed it there to give me heart to go through with the vile wickedness you have thrust me upon; for if I forgive the Holtes all else, how could I my Tomikin's cruel death?'

'Oh, in that case!' said Richard, turning with looks of disgust from the really horrible object he had observed set on the mantelpiece above.

It was the outward presentment of the lacerated cat, with its head steadied on the backbone by a skewer. In other respects the work was skilfully executed, stuffing dead animals having always been a favourite amusement of the aged solitary, who had acquired the art, with most of her other harmful science, from the strange naturalist, Esther Feldon's father.

'But he is to be better avenged soon, poor fellow!' the old woman resumed, grinning almost as frightfully as her favourite. 'I have told her I cannot perform the spell, now my imp's gone, unless she consents to make him friendly and helpful again by killing his killer. And I have the axe ready, and Prince, forsooth, though she loves him so well, is to come with her to me!'

'What will she not consent to, then, in her frenzy? for she is very fond of the sprightly animal!' exclaimed Grimsorwe, really now surprised. 'And I no longer wonder that we find it recorded parents would offer up their children to the demon-gods, in the ancient times, to make themselves rich and prosperous. And I am glad of it, too, on another score, for the creature hates me.'

'You will live to hate yourself, Richard!' replied the old woman, with extreme asperity.

'It may be. Perchance there are times when—no matter, I will still sting all round me ere, like the scorpion, I plunge my dart in my own

vitals ! No one loves himself more at present, however, than I do, grandam. Only I must not be espied out by others who love me less, and might so connect me by chance with what may be ill done to-night. Since all is well with you, and all prepared, therefore, I will take my departure. But if any accident should arise, I shall not be too remote, at all events, for *your* shrill-tongued summons to reach me.'

The old woman nodded wearily. 'Go, go,' she said; 'the sound of your voice grates somehow horribly on my ears. I could almost think you are the Evil One, and I in bondage of my own sin in raising you !'

'And, for my own part, I do begin to believe something in *your* witchcraft, Mother Grimsorwe, since, after so many years of vain cursing, you are like to bring so much to pass in the way of vengeance on Sir Thomas Holte to-night. How were it possible more completely to avenge my unhappy and dishonoured mother ? At the same time, see how you advance my prospects, which else would run the greatest risks of vanishing altogether, to supply the needy grandeur of such a son-in-law as the banished Palatine. But proud princes, still less than other men, rarely indeed marry their mistresses ! There will be no more talk of royal sons-in-law henceforth in Aston Hall !'

The traitor gave a dark, undertoned chuckle of barbarous triumph, and retired towards the door.

He drew it open and looked out.

'The moon wants but another quarter of an hour to be at the full,' he then remarked, with significance, to the beldam. 'Arabella will now be upon the way ; and even her proud heart will quake when she finds she has to leave her two attendants at yonder vast old withered oak. A marked object, Granny Grimsorwe, and therefore I chose it. Or else, methinks it is in itself too dismal and portentous a guide-post.'

'For a thousand years it has cast forth green leaves there, Esther Feldon's father would say !' the old woman muttered aloud, and yet, as it seemed, chiefly to herself.

'Hist ! they are coming. I must begone, or—gracious Heaven ! what is yonder unearthly-looking creature stalking there ? No, it has vanished—into the oak almost, it meseemed !'

Grimsorwe exclaimed these latter observations rather than merely uttered them.

'The oak ! What see you there ? The oak is known to be haunted by the fairies,' returned the witch, whose own superstition was immediately aroused.

'This was no fairy ; it seemed more like a black bear pawing up-right ! I saw its eyes gleam as it looked up at the moon. I could almost think that the tale reported by the German provost-marshal is true, and that a wild man of the woods haunts hereabouts !'

The old woman laughed sardonically. 'Well, I thought I saw something on the top of one of the tallest beech-trees in the lower wood myself last night ; but when I got there, it was only a harmless squirrel pulling a crow's nest to pieces.'

'Howbeit, I am glad I have not to go that way of the old oak. Yet it may well be only an owl, or a cow feeding there,' said Grimsorwe, aware that it would not do to excite his aged relative's alarms. 'Ah,

grandam, to think that you should have the laugh at me for such silly beliefs, after all ! I leave you, then. Prosper, and show that, if you have a witch's dangerous reputation, you will not have it for nothing.'

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE FAIRY OAK.

ARABELLA HOLTE had meanwhile certainly left Aston Hall upon her perilous and, truth to say, wicked and unmaidenly nocturnal enterprise.

The only excuse for this unhappy young woman must, in fact, be drawn from an aggravation of her worst fault. Had she not felt in the depths of her heart the lamenting appeal of a real passion for another, she would not have been so set on striving to discover some reason why she must hold herself irrevocably fastened to her father's will and purposes in the designs on Prince Rupert. She imagined that if she could only ascertain a fatality in this, her mind would be thoroughly reconciled to it, and she could devote all its power to the realisation.

It may be stated to her credit, however, on the other hand, that she felt so deep a secret repugnance to the task of ambitious enthralling she had set herself upon—felt so strongly the unwomanly and undignified conduct it compelled, since her brother had forced the consideration upon her, that she hoped to discover some reason to abandon the whole comfortless enterprise. If it was found that the Prince was not to wed her, this powerful reason would exist, and the regrets that might else have tormented her, to lose so glorious a prize, would cease to have influence.

But it is often scarcely possible to distinguish what are the governing motives of the human mind in some conjunctures of destiny. The current which ripples over the surface may not truly show the deep impelling movement of the tide below. Often, indeed, where we ourselves least intended, in setting out, we arrive.

But whatever the strength or nature of her actuating motives, Arabella Holte could not but experience a deep sensation of dread on stealing out of her father's stately mansion at night the midnight hour, unknown to nearly all its inmates, on such an errand. Phoebe Dewsnap, however, some of whose waiting-woman's upper garments she wore, attended her from her chamber ; and Robin Falconer was to meet them in the pleasure grounds, and be their convoy to an appointed spot in the park below ; not to mention that Arabella Holte's greyhound was allowed by her—nay, coaxed with divers kind cajoleries, and yet with the most deadly reluctance on his mistress's part—to accompany them.

Robin Falconer was easily induced by his damsel to believe that a fellow-servant of her own desired to have her fortune in wedlock shown her by the Witch of Aston, and the good-natured fellow readily lent his countenance and protection on the excursion. Robin had, in fact, taken quite a good-will towards the old woman and such inquiries, since his own loves had been so forwarded by Maud Grimsorwe's prediction that

he was to be Phœbe's bridegroom. Moreover, the *tête-à-tête* he was promised with his betrothed at the Fairy Oak, as it was called, had had charms for him sufficient to blind him to every other consideration.

It may be Robin allowed himself to be deceived, without being actually so much so as he pretended. The whole appearance of Phœbe's pretended fellow servitrix, her voice, her stately manners, the accompaniment of the dog, must have left him in little doubt as to who the third party really was; but Robin easily accounted in his own simple fancy, for Miss Holte's desire also to pry into the secrets of futurity. Every one about Aston formed their conjectures from seeing the Prince and the young lady there so much together; and Robin, who vastly admired Rupert's prowess, of which he had been an eye-witness and sharer, had no doubt that inquiries would result as fortunately for his young mistress as for himself and his betrothed.

The falconer was in punctual attendance at the drawbridge, just over the moat beyond the terrace towards the pools, and after a fond, friendly greeting of his betrothed, which resulted in divers half-angry, half-delighted, 'Prithee, Robin, forbear. Marry, good soul, too much of this!' the party set forward on their as yet not unfavourably-omened enterprise.

Arabella Holte had made up her resolve, and she was at no time lacking in courage and determination. Whatever came of it, she was now bent on executing the extraordinary plan she had formed.

She easily closed her mind to the apprehension of observation of following from the Hall. Most of its inmates had been asleep for hours, and she had reason to know that her father had singularly exceeded that night in a solitary potation after the Prince retired, and would consequently be disposed for heavy slumber. As for the Prince himself, her notion was that, if compelled by magic art to attend where his presence was desired, it would be in a kind of supernatural trance and insensibility, such as somnambulists of modern times are supposed to exhibit in submitting to mesmeric or magnetic influences.

And truly it might have been thought Arabella Holte herself was in some such state as this by the manner she proceeded to the appointed scene of divination. Her two companions went before by several steps, at her whispered desire to Phœbe, and she seemed rather to drag herself after them than to follow with the alert step of a person who obeys the impulse of his own mind. Some external but invisible agency appeared to impel her movements. More than once she hesitated, and looked fearfully back; but, as a general fact, kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and a silence which had in it something of spectral and darkly rapt, like the thought of a condemned criminal moving to the place of execution.

It had been arranged that as little was to be said as possible, to avoid the dangers of discovery of various kinds. But Phœbe Dew-nap herself felt singularly awkward and uncomfortable at her mistress's strange manner of movement, while Robin Falconer more than once intimated to her, with an effort at a lively tone, that 'her friend' already seemed under some witchcraft spell.

Still more remarkably, a similar feeling of reluctant submission to necessity appeared to have possession of Arabella's greyhound. The

swift creature walked laggingly on at its mistress's heels, never once darting off on its usual excursions and circlings of delighted fleetness, in which it chased the very wind for a prey, wantoning in its own splendid powers of pace. Its usually curled tail drooped straight, its ears were flatted to its head; and any one aware of what was intended would have thought the creature conscious of its doom. But perhaps, in reality, poor Prince only remembered the sharp chidings on the way, and rough reception he had found, on his recent visit to the Witch of Aston's hut, and was dismayed to find his lady's steps tended thitherward again.

In this strange way the whole group arrived, after a considerable transit, at the Fairy Oak.

This tree was one of great antiquity. If the weird naturalist, Esther Feldon's father, exaggerated in rating its age at a thousand years, still authentic records of Aston Manor verified its existence for nearly half that period. In old times it had marked a boundary between the counties of Warwick and Stafford, and was thus a well-known object in the district. But its mysterious antiquity, and the natural tendency of the rustic mind, associated it with various superstitions, and especially with the belief that it was haunted by fairies. A singular circle formed completely round on the mossy turf below the bare, gnarled roots of the forest-monarch, was supposed to be formed by the dancing of these festive sprites, with whom such disport was believed to be a favourite midnight recreation. Nor was the fancy at all diminished by the decay into which the Fairy Oak had fallen, and which left of it little more standing than a prodigious hollow trunk, seamed and scarred and bossed over with enormous wens, and only decorated in one or two branches with foliage of its own. What else there might be was furnished by the friendly zeal of an ivy, which covered the stately ruin wherever it could reach with a green matting, and hung loose tattered tresses of the same in various directions, almost to the ground—the probable cause, by its shade, of the circle visible on the grass below.

The conspirators against Arabella's honour had purposely chosen this tree for her to part with such hindrance to their nefarious designs as was furnished by the company of her two attendants. Maud Grimsorwe, in obedience to her instructions, conditioned that no nearer approach should be made to her dwelling by persons who might betray her dealings in a forbidden art. And Arabella herself was extremely unwilling to place her full secret in the possession of her servants. And now the Fairy Oak, though within sight of the witch's cottage, was too remote for prying, or overhearing any sound less piercing and powerful than such an outcry as it was not apprehended Miss Holte would venture or resolve to make under the circumstances.

The three midnight rangers arrived at the oak within a very few minutes after Richard Grimsorwe had been alarmed by the glimpse of a shaggy apparition passing into the tree while he gazed, and which he had had some difficulty in explaining to his own mind.

It is scarcely needful to inform the reader that this phantom was none other than Tubal Bromycham, out on one of his love-lorn wanderings in Aston Park.

Alarmed on his own part by the sudden appearance of a man at the door of Maud's hut, revealed by the furnace-like glow behind him, Tubal had retired into the concealment nearest at hand in the hollow of the oak. And considering it was very liable to suspicion as such, to any one acquainted with the internal decay of the tree, and apprehending he had come upon some unexpected outpost of soldiery, he availed himself of his great muscular power to thrust upward some height, and keep himself there by mere force of pressure between the nape of his neck and his feet, for there was hardly any internal remains in the tree for a support.

Tubal had but just accomplished this manoeuvre when footsteps, halting below the withered but still gigantic branches, convinced him of its necessity, however uneasy the position proved. And yet he nearly relaxed all tension of his frame, and dropped to the roots of the Fairy Oak, when, instead of a coarse trooper challenge, a commanding, but sweet-toned voice, whose accents he had never forgotten, sounded in his astonished ears.

'You are to await here my return, my good Phœbe, and friendly Robin Falconer. You need not be alarmed to do so, however; the fairies love faithful lovers, and often do them a good turn; but the old fortune-telling woman has made it a condition with me that I should go alone to her hut. Yonder it stands; if I should need you, I can easily summon you thence.'

So those still all-powerful accents declared. Such were the words whose echoes remained ringing in the sense of the unseen auditor.

Robin Falconer, however, very respectfully demurred. 'Nay, fair mistress,' he said, 'the witch's hovel is a much longer flight from the Fairy Oak than you think. I could scarcely make my bird-whistle sound so far, though I can bring a falcon down from nigh the sky with it. It were well we went with you much nearer than this.'

'It must be here that you remain. I must keep the condition enjoined me exactly, and if you would have the wise woman (why do you call her *witch*? she likes not the word!) as exactly observe hers. You are not afraid to remain alone with your sweetheart, my friend Robin, are you, who played so stout a part at Worcester Fight?' the young lady replied, with an effort at playful unconcern, but it was obvious that something also of surprise and irresolution quavered in her tones. She was doubtless surveying the length of intervening country to the Fish Stews Pool, which a bright burst of the now nearly full moon made plainly manifest.

'Nay, madam, in all love and honesty, I durst abide by Mistress Phœbe a whole year at the bottom of a coal-mine!' Robin Falconer replied, doubtless rather nettled at a faint saucy giggle which came from the damsel at her lady's observation.

'You shall need to abide but the half-hour which, after the full of the moon, will likely be required for the old woman to mumble her sorceries in, if, in reality, she possesses any such powers as she pretends to, which I own it something misdoubts me she does not; especially as she will have it she uses only an innocent white magic, and by pure fire agencies, to show people what of their coming fates they may well wish to know.'

And yet, if it be fate, what avails it to know !' Miss Holte said, but rather as if she were reasoning with herself than her companions.

'Pray you, dear mistress, leave us no longer trembling here than you can help it ; for although Robin and I be as firmly plighted to each other almost as if the parson had spoken it, I would not that any one should spy us out, and have cause to report that I met my sweetheart of a midnight so far from home !' said Phoebe, forgetting in her anxiety that her mistress did not desire to be recognised as such on the occasion.

'Who can spy you out, Phoebe, if you keep well in the shadow of the oak ? We are certainly unobserved at the Hall, there are no near watch-rooms in this part, I am well-assured, and nobody will be at the cottage excepting the poor old purblind fortune-teller herself, or such flimsy shadowy creatures as are all she pretends even likely to answer to her spell, if her evocations have indeed any power. But perhaps I have not your luck, Phoebe, and the man is unborn who is destined for a husband for me !' said Miss Holte.

'You, my lady ! No husband for you, so beautiful, young, and rich as you are !' exclaimed Phoebe, contemptuously. 'I only wish, however, it may prove the right one when the apparition comes, if it is the smock and the shroud spell the old woman is at. And then I am sure it will be none other than a Royal Prince ; and none other could deserve you, miss. I wish you joy of it beforehand, or the witch is no witch. A good deliverance from the danger of it too, for I have always heard say that little good ever comes of such a tempting of Providence ; and that's why I never dared to try it myself. Truly, my dear young lady, my granny often told me a story how a fellow-maiden of hers, in her youth, would try the trick, and saw a skeleton come in and turn the white linen to the red blaze, and sickened that hour, and lay in her shroud in the churchyard, in good truth, by a skeleton that turned up as they were digging her grave, within another full of the moon.'

'Well, and if it were so, she understood the worst, Phoebe, at once, and that is better than to be the prey of doubts and suspense !' returned Arabella ; adding, with a rather dismal pleasantry, 'My worst, I fear, will be no skeleton, but some stalwart brute of flesh and sinew whom I can never love ! Tush ! what are we prating now and time wasting so fast ? I must be gone. Prince, Prince ! Alas, poor fellow, you must needs go with me !'

'Why, say you so, so sadly, Mistress Arabella ? Whom should he be better pleased to go withal than the kind mistress who has collared his neck with silver ?' said Robin, caressing the elegant animal, which, however, stood still, and snuffed the air in the direction of the witch's cottage with a trembling all over its limbs, and a faint, terrified whine.

'He seems to dread going. Let him stay with Robin, good mistress, who will take care he turns not tail for the Hall till you return,' interceded Phoebe, who perhaps had her vague suspicions on the subject, for the sacrifice of living animals was a known portion of certain magic rites ; nay, there were unpleasant rumours current that in some cases the infernal agencies were not satisfied without an oblation of human blood, and children were supposed to be inveigled and murdered by the

terrible old wretches whose exploits formed so large a portion of the popular faith.

'Prince must go with me ; he must, he shall ; the old woman will not proceed else !' returned Miss Holte, in a sharp, angry accent ; and nevertheless she audibly burst into tears as she seized the hound by its silver collar, and dragging it reluctantly on with her, set off at a rapid pace for the witch's hut.

CHAPTER LXXV.

IN AND OUT OF THE OAK.

OF all this Tubal Bromycham had been perforce an auditor ; and was so stricken and absorbed by what he heard that he lost all recollection, even of the painful and constrained position in which he remained during the whole time.

Arabella Holte out of her father's house at midnight, in the midst of the solitary fields, with two of her father's servants for companions ! Arabella Holte seeking to learn her destiny in marriage from a horrible old hag, and by means forbidden alike by the laws of God and man !

Tubal was petrified with amazement as he listened. It is scarcely a metaphor to say so. And for some moments amazement was his master-feeling, and kept him fixed in breathless attention in his comfortless elevation. A fissure in the trunk of the oak close behind his head gave facilities for overhearing, in other respects.

This emotion predominated for several moments after Arabella's departure. It was then succeeded by something that closely resembled fear, if it was not quite fear, in that strong-nerved man.

The Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham was endued with all the superstitions of his age, and the rank of society in which he had been reared. Scarcely any rank was indeed at that time exempt from those relating to witchcraft and sorcery. Moreover, a childhood spent among mines and colliers, whose gloomy underground work disposes them for dark and melancholy fancies, could not fail to prepare his mind for the apprehensions that now invaded it.

But more than apprehensions. He was thoroughly convinced of the reality of all he heard, and that the Witch of Aston truly possessed the powers she was stated to intend to use on Arabella Holte's behalf.

And now for a brief while a sentiment of the most violent indignation, mingled with ravening jealousy, assailed his heart, and quickened its beating into cruel throbs.

If Arabella Holte were not utterly faithless to the memory of that old clandestine, unavowed but passionate attachment of theirs, what needed she to inquire of a sorceress who was to be her husband ? Her fate was at her own disposal, if she dared make it so ! And with a rage of despair that fairly made him grind his teeth, in spite of the closeness of the clench compelled by his position in the oak, Tubal rushed to the

conclusion that she desired and hoped to assure herself that her allurements would not be spent in vain upon the nephew of the King.

With this idea lighting up like fire in his brain, Tubal's first thought was of prevention, of darting out of his concealment, and preventing the completion of the unhallowed rite, which he did not doubt would offer Arabella every encouragement to proceed in her plans. And he allowed himself to drop, with scarcely any precaution, to his feet.

Engaged as were Phoebe and Robin, who had seated themselves at the foot of the oak, in their own interesting conversation, so portentous a circumstance as that the tree gave a hollow rumble and shook behind them, naturally startled them. But the falconer explained the matter after a pause, to soothe the apprehensions of his fair companion. 'It is the fairies, Phoebe dear, getting on their little horses for a revel; for it is known they all live in the oak by day, and come out by night to take their pleasure and exercise. We shall see such a pretty sight just now in the moonlight, when the Fairy King comes out with all his knights and yeomen in green and gold. But nothing can be so pretty as my Phoebe's own self, when she smiles her Robin leave, as she does now, to take a kiss.'

And so saying the good yeoman snatched himself the favour he partly announced conceded; but apparently by the difficulty he experienced before he obtained it, with only one yes to the bargain. And the honest-hearted English yeoman was quite content with this indulgence, when at length it was accorded, and never dreamed of abusing the opportunities of the midnight scene with the object of his manly and uncorrupt affection.

Meanwhile a singular variation had come over Tubal's distracted thoughts, and which wonderfully soothed them.

While steadying himself in the consciousness that it would be harmful to any purpose he might form, to be discovered by the pair who were so near, an idea suddenly occurred to him that the strange, the irresistible longing he had felt that night to venture where he was, was caused by the spell of the witch. That he, Tubal Bromycham, once the secretly-loved lover, was destined to become the husband of Arabella Holte also, and was compelled thither by the spell to show that the fact should be so. Was it an hallucination of love and superstition, or a suggestion of passion and desperation, in themselves so ingenious and so courageous?

Tubal's historian can scarcely say, since Tubal himself would have been at an utter loss to declare how the case really stood. But be the truth how it might be, whatever the impelling motives, Tubal determined to brave every obstacle, every danger, to answer the witch's spell, and present himself in her hut as the DESTINED FUTURE HUSBAND OF ARABELLA HOLTE!

This resolution sobered him on other points. He perceived how advisable it was not to let Robin or Phoebe understand his unseen presence, which a moment before he had determined to proclaim in the most openly audacious and defying manner.

Luckily the rifted portion of the oak, by which it could be entered almost as conveniently as by a doorway, was on the farther side of the

tree from the billing lovers. But the open slope of meadows and scattered young plantation down to the witch's abode lay open and bright before them in the moonlight. It was therefore necessary for Tubal to take a rather extensive winding from the Fairy Oak to the skirts of the water, so that he might approach and enter on the scene of operations unobserved by persons who would not fail to interfere in his design.

His project was favoured by Robin's beginning to warble, in a very low tone, like a bird to its mate, a rustic love-song of the time, very different from Arabella Holte's stiff court invention in that description of minstrelsy :

'Sweet ! can you love me,
Sweet, sweet, sweet ?
Say if you love me,
Sweet, answer sweet !
To a true love like mine,
Like true love is meet ;
Say, that you truly love me,
As I truly love you, sweet !
Sweet, sweet, sweet !'

Taking advantage of the undertoned but earnest murmuring of this rustic melody, Tubal glided out of the oak, and betaking himself to a distant line of trees, remote from the margin of the pools, only doubled under their shadow to retrace the way to the Witch of Aston's hut.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

RESCUE OR NO RESCUE.

ARABELLA HOLTE had meanwhile arrived at the appointed place, delayed by the efforts made by the greyhound not to be led on the track its mistress seemed determined to force it to pursue. No doubt the poor animal had a very distinct recollection of the withered tenant's displays of fury and violence towards it, though probably unable to conceive that the destruction of the vermin it had pursued to death was the occasion of the demonstration.

The lady and her hound arrived, however, at last, and Miss Holte pushing open the ajar-door of the hovel, felt almost as well inclined as her shrinking animal to effect a retreat from the spectacle that presented itself.

It is only necessary to say that it was scarcely at all changed from the description of the scene during Richard Grimsorwe's consultation with his grandmother. He was gone, but the other portents of the spectacle remained ; perhaps a little heightened by the circumstance that the old woman had begun to exhibit an ill-omened species of wakefulness and activity.

She was squatting on the floor, writing a name in singular characters within the shadow of the triangle, in charcoal.

The letters composing this were of large size, and in reality of Hebrew conformation, an accomplishment which it is difficult to know how Maud

Grimsorwe had acquired, unless one takes into account her former association with the learned parish clerk of Sutton. Though it is still hard to say why she should have devoted any time to the acquisition of the Biblical language, unless it may be true what is reported by adepts of the demon world, that they best understand and obey the original language of man ; which the Hebrew is supposed to be.

'You are busy, dame !' said Arabella, entering the cottage.

'Have you brought the dog ?' returned the malignant old wretch, starting up with haggard eagerness at once from her occupation.

'It is here !' replied Arabella, dejectedly. 'But again, I implore of you, Mother Grimsorwe ! if it be possible to proceed without so cruel a sacrifice, spare the poor animal. Prince but followed his natural instincts when he chased and killed your prowling cat. Why should you be so rancorous against him ?'

'So do but the cut-purse and the cut-throat ? What more natural than to thirst for another's gold, and to quiet resistance by the thrust of a knife ? Yet the thief and the assassin mount the scaffold to the hangman's clutch !' returned the old woman, vindictively eyeing the trembling and crouching hound, as she added, 'And here is Tomikin's murderer now !'

'Peace awhile, you will make him break from me and his chain, and tell me what name is written here !' said Miss Holte, gazing at the inscription on the floor ; perhaps chiefly to gain a little time for the victim.

'The word is Astorath, who is a Grand Duke of Hell !' the hag answered, with a vivid smile, in which the assumption of power and a conviction of her own imposture were singularly mingled. 'He is one of the ugliest of the fiends, but very powerful. Satan himself goes in dread of him sometimes when they quarrel for a prey. But he has a wonderful dominion and influence with great Lords and Princes, and, I take it, our affair is with such to-night. Those who invoke him properly, and go so far as to adore him as a god, them he makes very powerful and mighty conquerors ! He knows the past, the present, and the future, and when he is in a good humour with the sacrifices offered him, will answer almost any question you can put to him relating to any of these. He alone of all the fallen angels still maintains that he was condemned unjustly, and is therefore the more rancorous and inexorable never to cease from troubling the creatures of God, and wages rebellion against His decrees throughout the world. All this is very well, is it not ?'

'Do you mean to raise this fiend to-night ?' said Arabella, looking and feeling, reasonably enough, considerably alarmed at this description of so horribly powerful an infernal.

'Nay, I hope we shall have no need. His stench is as the stench of a ploughed churchyard, or of a slaughtered army festering in the sun !' the hag replied. 'I do but place Astorath's name there because it is so potent ; no chance fiend will dare to take what he will suppose to be his place in the triangle. The power we are to invoke is that of the pure Demon of Fire, Baal ; a king in hell. But even Baal I shall do my best not to require you to see, for he is very frightful. He has three heads ;

one of a man, another of a toad, the third a cat's. And that reminds me—Hold your dog firmly by the collar while I get the axe.'

The vengeful hag strode to a corner of her hut, and produced a long-handled, but very blunt-looking and rusty weapon, of the kind indicated, worn, in fact, to a mere stump of hack-edged iron. But she seemed to think it sufficient for her purpose, and returning with her sunken eyes shining in their wrinkled cavities like corpse-lights, aimed a blow at the unlucky animal. But whether age and passion had disabled her, or whether Arabella's feelings deprived her of the requisite energy to perform her part in the tragedy, the hound eluded the stroke, and, with a truly wonderful spring, broke from its mistress's hold, and fled with a dreadful howl from the hut.

Maud flung her disappointed axe after it, and then burst into a horrible screech-owl lamentation over the failure, mingled with sharp reproaches to the young lady.

'You have done it on purpose, and spoilt the whole spell!' she grumbled viciously. 'But when were the Holtes other than false and treacherous? Go, go, you may as well return to your warm bed at once, unless you can bring the vile beast back! Call him, whistle him, bring him back!'

'I cannot, I will not, but neither shall you deceive me with your poor excuses! Fulfil your promise, hag, or I will make such representations to my father, who already believes you very fit for the tar-barrel.'

'Quiet, quiet, my fine young woman, then! You shall have your own way, you shall have your own way. Yet I did half repent me; and might, perhaps, but for the treacherous abetment of the hound in his escape. But we will find a time for him too; when the name of Prince will no longer sound perhaps so sweet in your ears! Tut, tut; I am only joking; you must excuse a poor, simple, doating, daft old woman, *hag* you call me! no matter! I was once held as good-looking a body as yourself, my fine mistress, or any other in Aston parish. But that was before I was a grandmother, no doubt, no doubt. For I had a daughter once, and she a son! daughter, daughter. My cat, my cat. Be not afraid, Mistress Holte; I have regained my mind now, and will proceed in the business we are upon presently, as you would have me.'

Arabella was so much alarmed at the old woman's incoherent paroxysm that she was on the point of following her hound in its judicious exit. But these latter words allayed her panic, and she paused in her departure. 'Proceed, then, Mother Grimsorwe,' she said, 'and earn your promised reward. Nay, I shall be better than my word in that, if you will be but as good as yours.'

'I will be better, I will be better, too,' muttered the hag, 'though I do not well know how we shall proceed without a heart taken alive and palpitating from some creature's breast! Tomikin was a rare helpful one at that; I had only to look at him, and he would make for the woods, and bring me a pigeon or a dove back, with its wings beating all alive, and taking such pains not to kill it till it was wanted. Where is the garment I bade you?'

'It is here,' replied Miss Holte, producing one of the finest white linen, beautifully trimmed with lace. 'The Queen herself gave me this when I had last charge of her wardrobe, in my rotation among her maids-of-honour, as a reward for my diligence in the office, and bade me keep it for my wedding-day.'

'And it was a present for a queen to make, indeed !' Maud answered, taking the fine woof in her withered brown paws, and surveying it, watch as she was, with much of the curious interest women of no such supernatural pretensions mostly take in examining each other's finery. 'And the Queen herself must have thought it likely enough you should marry a Prince, to make you such a present for wedding wear. We must hang it on the triangle, but it shall not scorch, for I will place my shroud over it, which is of good thick white woollen stuff.'

So saying, Maud hobbled to a corner of the glaring apartment, and opened a cupboard, whence she produced a long flat box. Opening that, a strong smell of camphor diffused itself all over the chamber, and the old woman drew forth a long garment resembling a nightgown, but the uses of which could not be doubted from the peculiar folds and crimping at the breast and wrists.

She returned with this to Miss Holte, and, in courteous interchange of the recent inspection, handed over the shroud to the young lady.

'Tis a pretty work, all of my own spinning and yarn ; and smell how sweet it savours of the camphor drug. Yet, 'tis not so much for the pleasant savour either, as to keep the moths out, that I embalm it thus. They eat everything, moths do ; moths and rust eat everything.'

Arabella took the ominous robe with evident reluctance, and spent but little time in the examination.

Maud, receiving it back, flung it over the richly-laced 'smock,' observing, with a chuckle, 'I am as proud of it as ever you can be of yours ; and I may well doubt which will need her dress the sooner. We must be quick, however, now, for the moon is nigh the full, as I look at her. Mark, then, what I say to you, Mistress Holte ! Get into the bed and draw the clothes and curtains so close to you that you can only see what is happening on the hearth, and no one thence see you. Keep your gaze fixed then on the triangle ; and when I have uttered the spell, I will open the farther casement yonder, and take myself off into the open air ; for not even the witch must remain when the phantom comes. And if you would escape all danger of breaking the charm, and the magic sleep of the summoned one (in which case they often wax madly furious and wrathful, and afterwards remember things to your prejudice), you must not utter a word, nor breathe a sigh, through the whole course of the appearance's arrival and departure.'

'Do not fear me for that ; I can keep my silence as if death had sealed it, when need is,' replied Arabella. 'But,' and she surveyed the mouldering old couch and its decorations with visible disdain and repugnance, 'must I get into this unsavoury heap ?'

'Or run the risk of being perceived by the apparition ; and I have known that on a sudden recollection, at a future time, of what had happened him thus, a man would take an utter loathing and abhorrence of his bride, that nothing could ever afterwards remove,' replied the

witch ; and, indeed, popular legends related cases of the possessed person being seized with such a violent resentment at the remembrance of the magnetic tortures inflicted upon him by the magic rite, as to kill the unhappy bride in the very nuptial chamber.

Arabella no longer made objections upon receiving this warning ; but no one could have mistaken the disgust and repugnance with which she betook herself to the old woman's wretched crazy pallet, which looked as if it was fitter for a colony of rats to find covert in.

Having agreed, however, to what was required, Arabella made no half measures of it, and soon only her beautiful, excited face appeared out of the coarse blankets, while the curtains were so drawn as even to shade that nearly out of sight from any removed observation. Only the anxious gleam of her fine eyes could have drawn attention thitherward, for the clothes were heaped about her in such a manner as nearly to conceal her figure completely.

Maud gave a balefully sardonic glance at these preparations, and then turned to pursue her own unholy share in the rite.

It is needless, and might be wearisome, to detail the numerous ceremonies enacted by the nefarious old woman in carrying out her grandson's base and barbarous project.

Something like a profane and horrible imitation of a Roman Catholic mass was enacted by this priestess of the Devil of Revenge, if no other.

Kneeling before the now lessening pile of glowing charcoal in the triangle, the hag muttered a series of strange and fiendish-sounding names, in the form of a devilish litany, but chiefly in languages Arabella Holte could not understand ; perhaps she did not understand them herself, and they were mere fragments of the teachings of the wizard clerk of Sutton, who had so misapplied his extraordinary learning and ingenuity as to devote himself by their aid to the study of the imaginary, but not less detestably wicked and profane art now pretended to be practised by his former disciple.

No doubt this formula was to be taken as an evocation of the spirits whose names were called upon to assist in the unholy work, which might not in reality have been unworthy of demon assistance, if the villainous men who were engaged in it were not of themselves alone sufficient for any wickedness. And to complete the whole hideous mockery, Maud kept up a constant censuring of the fire-glow from a silver pot held by a triangular chain, which diffused clouds of aromatic and singularly languid and enervating perfumes all over the chamber.

In this fumigation Arabella Holte began to feel herself becoming strangely and yet voluptuously entranced into a kind of pleasant lethargy and repose.

Her head swam, but with no uncomfortable giddiness ; rather with the first symptoms of intoxication from fine wines, when ideas full of brilliancy and gaiety rush in a splendid sort of kaleidoscope delirium through the brain.

It almost seemed as if she no longer feared what might happen on account of its supernatural character, but rather felt the awe of the approach and enhancement of its delight and satisfaction.

In the midst of all this, the witch's utterance gradually grew fainter, and seemingly exhausting into pauses and breaks. At last it ceased altogether; and dimly through the clouds of incense Arabella watched her retire to the solitary casement, which she opened with some difficulty, as if the shutters were little in the habit of being moved.

There was no glass in the panes, and the moon shone in from its full rounded effulgence in the sky. And then it certainly appeared to Arabella as if the witch raised herself and sloped out of the chamber, on a strong breeze that blew in at the door, by the casement.

Thus she was left alone, to await the results of all this extraordinary preparation. And certainly everything concurred to heighten into credulity and tremendous expectation the emotion with which the proud beauty awaited the solution of the great perplexity produced by the struggles of a purer and nobler passion, with its ambitious aspirings, and her father's senseless urgency, in her heart.

There was a deep silence of several moments.

Then a step was audible on the exterior of the cottage; and we do not pretend that even the haughty and resolute young woman's heart did not throb wildly and quickly at the sound. And yet it somehow indefinitely struck her as a very unspiritual and substantial sign of approach on the part of an apparition.

But there was little time for consideration on this point; a shadow darkened the low threshold of the hut, and a figure bent its head and entered the chamber.

Great Heaven! it was no Rupert—no Prince Palatine! His towering, but shambling and ill-knit stature little resembled this, which seemed rather of a giant shortened in the lower limbs, but moving with all the power and active unity of proportion in muscular development.

Arabella looked with eyes nearly starting from their orbits with intensity of expectation, and a heart that literally stood still with dread. And she beheld—was it himself, indeed, or his apparition?—the form and lineaments of Tubal Bromycham, as he staggered in with a singular dizziness and uncertainty of movement that seemed to affect him the moment he entered the witch's hut. And yet he made towards that fateful triangle. And it was the scorned and shamefully repulsed and maltreated Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham who turned the shroud below the laced wedding garment it nearly concealed there!

Tubal appeared then to pause, to examine the robe; he seemed to perceive the cyphers of the beloved name wrought upon the bosom, and knelt and kissed them, with a tenderness—with a respect—with an adoring lingering of the lips, that vibrated even to that haughty lady's inmost heart, and almost constrained her to some reciprocating sigh.

In truth, Arabella Holte's emotions, on witnessing what she now did, were singularly at variance with what might have been expected. The phantom's homage certainly did not excite her irritation; on the contrary she seemed relieved of a great burden and anxiety, and if she had ventured on any utterance at all, it would probably have been an ejaculation of happiness and release.

The apparition arose from its knees, turned one searching glance around the apartment, and, doubtless attracted by the magnetism of the

human eye, started to recognise those star-like orbs a-gaze from the witch's bed. The figure, in fact, stood as if struck by sudden immovability on the glaring hearth, striving to fathom the meaning of the mysterious and tremendous dream which it may be supposed to conceive it was passing through.

A thought seemed then to strike it. The eyes shone up with a much fiercer and wilder light than the glow in the charcoal fire : and with an audible groan of the deepest anguish, the supposed phantom pursued its way towards the open window.

Then it stepped out and drew the shutters to—not wholly, as Arabella believed she could clearly discern.

An instant's pause followed, during which she felt herself reviving from the species of stupor of amazement and expectation in which she had doubtless been held. Then believing the whole phantasmagoria to be expected had been exhibited, Arabella was about to rise and leave her musty couch, when again a tramp of footsteps came to her ear. And, with a sensation of wonder and terror, to which no language could do justice, she beheld Prince Rupert enter the hut, stooping from the low roof, but with (for a phantom) a strangely abrupt, angry, and defying gesture of advance, as his glance fell upon the whole extraordinary scene in the Witch of Aston's abode.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE RIVAL PRINCE AND BLACKSMITH.

RUPERT had thoroughly learned his evil lesson. After effecting this inauspicious entrance, he moved deliberately to the fire, deliberately raised and looked at the garments suspended before it, and then, with a gesture full of disdain and repulse, crumpled them up together—laced smock and crimped shroud—and threw them into the furnace pile of glowing charcoal in the chimney-place.

Arabella Holte's first emotions of alarm and wonder now changed their character, and the haughty young lady could not forbear uttering an exclamation of indignant amazement at so flagrant and obvious a sign of contempt and rejection ; though, as she imagined, on the part only of a spectral representative of the real doer of the deed. But this slight utterance, Rupert well knew from his own country's beliefs, entitled him to consider the spell broken, and justified him in awakening from his supposed magic slumber.

'Ha !' he exclaimed, suddenly starting round, and staring wildly about ; 'where am I ? What voice speaks there ? Beautiful sorceress ! is it you have summoned me, with so strange and deadly a swooning torture, from my quiet sleep to this witchcraft hut ? But you shall pay the penalty—in your adoring lover's arms !'

And pretending for the first time to catch Miss Holte's fear-rapt gaze from the witch's couch, the Prince rushed towards it.

Ere he reached it, however, she had sprung from it with a shriek of terror, and made a dart towards the door of the hut.

This only, however, placed her the sooner in his powerful grasp.

'Arabella ! Miss Holte !' he then exclaimed, forgetful of his mystic part, 'whither are you going ? There is nothing to alarm you. I am no spectre, no delusion. I am your faithful Rupert—your Prince—who adores you, though he cannot wed you, and whose affection you have seemed to repay !'

'Release me, sir ; unhand me, if you be a Prince, as you say—if you be a gentleman of whatsoever degree ! But you are some dreadful phantom, raised by the foul witch of this hut, or you would never have had the base insolence and cruelty—'

'This, then, to convince my dearest Arabella I am no phantom but her own adoring Rupert,' exclaimed the coarse-minded royal trooper, detaining the young lady with no little violence, and endeavouring to stifle her exclamations of rage and indignation with his winey kisses. But on a sudden he felt himself seized behind by his long, mane-like hair, and torn away back with such force and fury, that when the powerful grasp which had seized him left its hold, the impulse yet sent him reeling headlong into a corner of the hut.

The rescuer's figure then emerged in the glow of the fire, distinct in its unusual proportions, before the gaze of Arabella Holte, who cowered at the sight, overwhelmed with shame and dread, with her hands over her face, to its very feet.

'Tubal, Tubal !' she exclaimed, 'spare me—spare me ! I have been betrayed into this miserable place. Spare me, and save me !'

'Betrayed, Arabella Holte !' a sad and quivering, though deep-toned voice replied, 'betrayed by your own pride—by your own ambition—by your own faithlessness. I have heard all in the gossip of your servants at the Fairy Tree, and you can deceive me no more now. I have but saved you, perchance, from the least harmful consequences of your treason to nature and your own heart ; the worst are in your soul.'

'They are—they are ! But I repent, Tubal. I feel within that inmost soul how falsely—how foolishly—how madly—I have followed the ambitious dictates of vanity and the aspiring fancies of my father. But be merciful now in your hour of triumph. Remember how you loved me once, and do not expose, do not ruin me now. Protect me from this heartless man—this Prince. Merciful Heaven, protect yourself !'

This latter exclamation was occasioned by her observing Rupert's approach, returning savagely on his strangely hastened steps, after a moment's stupefaction of surprise and rallying in the corner where he was flung.

Tubal's back being that way, of course he did not so immediately discern the probable assault. But he whirled round at once to face his antagonist, and, strange to say, when Rupert's glance fell upon him, bold and impetuous and furiously excited as he was, he seemed struck with dismay, and stepped back involuntarily, quite yelling out the words—'The Provost-Marshall's Wild Man of the Woods !'

'No, Prince—as you call yourself ; no, unmanly and false wooer of Arabella Holte ! I am Tubal Bromycham, Lord of Birmingham, and leader of the good town against you and all your tyrannous masters.

And I have loved this lady with all my heart and soul, and therefore with both do abhor and detest so false and treacherously designing a rival as you must be, after what I have seen and heard. And I challenge and defy you to dare even to cast upon Arabella Holte a profane glance while Tubal Bromycham is here to defend her honour with his life.'

'Madman! what is this you rave?' said Rupert, glaring with eyes in which a new and ferocious passion, in blood so untamed and hot as his, shot up its fire. 'You! some base mechanic slave as you seem, to set yourself up as the champion of Arabella Holte—against me!'

'Try else,' was Tubal's unshaken response.

'Miss Holte, do you sanction this extraordinary insolence!' exclaimed the Prince, wild with indignation at a species of opposition of all others the most surprising and exasperating in a person bred in the German superstitions of the rights and supremacies conferred by birth and rank.

'I place myself under the protection of this *man*, against your insulting treatment, *Prince!*' was Arabella Holte's reply.

'Indeed! is it so? Ha! and what *man* is this, madam? *Tubal Bromycham!* Tubal Bromycham! Insolent rebel! truly, I have been informed of you by the name. And you are here, here in the midst of the quarters of the King's soldiers, by night, by stealth, avowing yourself, with this audacity, head and leader of the atrocious and unprovoked sedition of Birmingham. Spy, traitor, dearly shall you abide the discovery! I arrest you as such. Surrender, or I cleave you to the chine,' cried the ferocious royal soldier of fortune, drawing his sword, and flourishing it in menace over the head of the leader of the revolt of Birmingham, who thus audaciously announced himself his rival.

Arabella shrieked aloud, in the expectation of witnessing her unarmed rescuer's immediate immolation. But Tubal, by a sudden movement, stretching his long arms, rushing in and grappling with his foe, effectually frustrated his action, no scope remaining for the stroke of the weapon. Indeed, Rupert was even forced to abandon his sword to avoid being absolutely stifled in the powerful seizure to which he found himself subjected, which resembled that of the boa constrictor round the rhinoceros, and apply all his efforts to free himself from the pressure.

A violent struggle ensued, though only of brief duration, the antagonists being locked in so close an embrace of contention that it could hardly have been possible to tell, as it progressed, whose muscular powers were yielding to the other's. But Tubal Bromycham's extraordinary strength availed him against all the superior stature and dexterous efforts of the trained soldier, in whose education, at that time, wrestling formed an important branch of qualification. And the contest ended by his raising the whole stalwart and strenuously resisting figure of the Prince high in the air in his mighty arms, and dashing him backward down, with such violence to the earthen floor of the hut that he lay there stunned, bleeding, and insensible.

'Saints of mercy! What have you done, Tubal Bromycham?' gasped Arabella, ceasing at the spectacle from the shrieks she had not ceased to utter during the encounter. 'You have slain the nephew of the King!'

'I have avenged an insult offered to Arabella Holte, I care not on whom. Moreover, the man threatened my life unfairly, I being weaponless,' Tubal replied, with gloomy composure. 'But I trust he is not dead, if you desire his life, Arabella. I have inflicted no mortal wound upon him, and have cast others as heavily ere now who were none the worse of it in life or limb a week after—unless he bleeds at the mouth; let me see.'

And Tubal knelt beside his fallen rival, and raising his head in his hand, remarked, 'No, he is only stunned for awhile. But is he not totally at my mercy, were Tubal Bromycham the man to take the unfair advantage he fain would have taken of me?'

'He is, he is, Tubal! But at least use the advantage of the time that may remain ere he revives to vengeance, or to the renewal of a conflict which at all events must end in my exposure and disgrace. Save yourself now, most generous man! I am safe, nothing requires your further delay here,' exclaimed Arabella.

'And leave you to revive him, to watch over him, to soothe, to comfort, to console with your caresses his defeat?' Tubal replied, with fierceness; 'rather will I perish here.'

'No, no; such is not my intention. I will leave him here to his fate—to the care of his friend the witch—the detestable hag will be sure to return anon; and will make my own way home to the Hall, and will protest henceforth so total an ignorance of all that has occurred here that he shall himself believe he has been fooled by some magic delusion of my presence. Only place yourself at once in safety, for were you discovered now, here—powers divine! you are already discovered, are lost! Look there, there—at the window, look!'

The unglazed opening by which Tubal had entered on the scene, after observing what happened on the exterior through the half-closed shutters, now let in a full glare of moonlight, and exhibited the figure of a dark man in a lawyer's robe. Tubal turned at the exclamation.

'It is either the devil or Richard Grimsorwe!' he exclaimed, after a moment's attentive survey.

'Tubal Bromycham here!—the Prince stretched on the floor!—Help, murder, help!—the Prince is murdered!'

Such outcry the figure made at the highest pitch of its ill-omened voice, and disappeared from the opening.

'Fly, Tubal, I tell you, fly. This wretch—ah! he has doubtless been in the treason of it all—will speedily summon assistance. There is an outpost of soldiers at no great distance, and—oh, if Grimsorwe gives the alarm, and I am discovered here, my honour too is gone! Otherwise, I can outface the world I never was here!' Arabella wildly implored.

'If you bid me, dearest Arabella; if you concern yourself for me so far as to wish me to place myself out of danger—'

'I do! I do!'

'And you will depart, also?'

'I will, I will! Come this way—this way! I will go at the same moment. For my sake, dear, dear Tubal! if ever you have loved me, save your own life now, at once.'

'Oh, Arabella! dearest of women—most honoured of ladies, these

words would raise me from the dead to do your will. I would die a thousand deaths for you, and you bid me live. Only leave at the same time ; permit me only to see you in some place of safety nigh your father's house through the park—'

'No, Tubal, no ! there is no need ! I have ample protection at the Fairy Oak ; you know, two of my servants await me there ; but every moment may be of consequence to secure your flight, which must surely not be that way. All is lost else ; but what do I say ? All is lost already ! Hark, yonder, that bugle blast !'

A bugle, sounding the alarm-note for cavalry, now indeed came to the hearing of the agitated interlocutors, and apparently from no great distance.

Tubal listened for a moment. 'What can be the meaning of this ?' he exclaimed, stepping to the door of the hut, whither also Arabella affrightedly accompanied him.

The meaning of it was that Cornet Titus, who had guided Prince Rupert to the witchcraft scene, and was sauntering away at some considerable remoteness on the margin of the Fish Pools, but near enough to hear Miss Holte's outcry, without making any manner of response or even affecting to hear it, no sooner distinguished Grimsorwe's yelled appeal than he returned in the greatest hurry and consternation towards the hut. And on the way, finding the terrifying exclamations repeated, raised the bugle with which he came furnished to his lips, and blew a blast, which was instantly answered by the appearance of a number of soldiers from an outpost on the skirts of a neighbouring wood. The alarm continuing, several of these men discharged their muskets, and were seen running breathlessly over the moonlit meadows towards the noise.

Seen by Arabella Holt and Tubal Bromycham the moment they reached the door of the hut.

The former seemed to abandon all hope at once, on discerning this approach. 'Oh, I am lost, I am lost !' she exclaimed. 'These men will find me here, and the whole dreadful scene will have to be explained to my destruction. This man—this prince—lying wounded, perhaps dead, out in such a spot, in my company ! Shame and unutterable disgrace await me ; and my father will kill me in his rage !'

'Be not afraid, dearest lady. Remember me sometimes with kindness, whatever befalls. Hie home at once at every speed you can make from this place, and I will hazard all to save you. Perhaps I shall myself escape also ; but if not—if not—remember always that I died for you !'

So Tubal said ; and snatching Miss Holte's hand to his lips for a single moment of delirious tenderness, he darted forward ere she could do anything to prevent him, or even inquire his meaning, and presented himself plainly to the approaching force. Then raising both his clenched fists, he shook them aloft in defiance, and with a shout of contemptuous challenge, like an Indian war-whoop, to his coming foes, moved off as if to betake himself for shelter among the scattered plantations in the rear of Maud Grimsorwe's wretched abode.

Arabella discovered at once the meaning of the manœuvre, that he purposed to be observed, and to direct the pursuit on his traces, at what-

ever personal hazard, so as to allow her time to effect her own escape from the disastrous and inexplicable scene.

For a moment a sensation of gratitude, love, pity—scarcely could it be said how many overpowering feelings of the kind—rushed in full tide through Arabella's heart, and almost she resolved to rush forth side by side with her heroic lover and share his fate, whatever it might be.

A moment's reflection assured her how useless the effort would prove ; how much more likely to act harmfully for Tubal, and perhaps fatally hamper and delay his flight. She knew how famous he was for his feats of activity and speed ; how thoroughly acquainted he was with the ground to be traversed ; the short distance that would suffice to place him in safety in Birmingham ; and hope for him revived in her heart. And with this hope the instinct of self-preservation—above all, of the preservation of that honour and repute which were so dear to the proud daughter of Sir Thomas Holte—reanimated her to the efforts necessary on her own part to render the generous sacrifice made to her of avail.

To lose fair fame and placing in the world for a man who despised, who contemned her in the only light in which he should have sought her, in which ambition only prompted herself to desire success, the very thought stimulated Arabella to any effort to avoid so deplorable an exposure and disgrace. Moreover, she had now no slight perception that she was the subject of an organised conspiracy of her enemies ; to foil whose base plans were alone sufficient motive to exertion.

With this latter conviction in her mind, Arabella concluded hastily that her retreat would be anticipated in the direction she had come, by the Fairy Oak, probably watched for there by the villanous Grimsorwe. Very unluckily therefore she determined to take flight in another direction, without attempting to apprise Phoebe and Robin Falconer of the facts of the case, hoping that they, too, would take the alarm and retire unharmed. Indeed, it had been arranged, if any discovery was made, all parties were to betake them home to the Hall the best and speediest way they could.

Arabella gave a single glance back to the hut, now thoroughly lighted by the moonlight, and perceived with a new quickening of terror that Rupert was moving and stirring himself up from his stupefaction. What might not be his feelings of revenge and exasperation against herself also, after the injury and indignity he had suffered !

Arabella paused not to calculate, but with the affrighted speed of a hind that sees the jungle stirring for the unseen tiger's spring, rushed out of the hut and fled.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE CROSSBOW-SHOT.

UNLUCKILY, meanwhile, for all parties, Robin Falconer's attention had been at once attracted by the summons of the bugle.

His young mistress's terrified exclamations, as had been anticipated by

the atrocious planners of the affair, had not reached his ears. But he started at once upon his feet from his loving chitchat with his betrothed, upon that dismal blast.

Phoebe Dewsnap jumped up beside him, greatly alarmed. 'What can it be?' she exclaimed.

'Do you see yonder creature, Phoebe?' the falconer replied, with his hair bristling upright.

Tubal Bromycham at the moment emerged, on his act of devotion, in the open before the witch's hut.

It should be remembered that some allusion had already been made in the conversation of the pair to the dreadful phantom Provost-Marshal Storcks reported he had recently come upon in Aston Woods, and which was now a common story among the servants and other implicit trusters of the marvellous at Aston Hall.

'Oh me, yes!' responded Phoebe; 'it is the Wild Man of the Woods the German hangman gentleman has been telling us all of late he has seen about ours at Aston. And the witch has brought it here on purpose, and it has torn my poor young lady to pieces.'

'Deem you so, Phoebe? It was our young lady, then. Oh, it is like enough then, my lass! The horrible old woman has always hated my master's house and name. But I will avenge her. Provost Storcks, who knew I was often out in the woods by night, taught me how to cope with a wehr-wolf. I have a bolt here for my crossbow which would bring down the fiend's self; for it is twisted with a silver sixpence, with the Grace of God outside. Of course, I have my bow slung on my shoulders, and here is moonlight clear enough to hit a sparrow on a top bough, much more a bulky thing like this.'

While the falconer spoke he was bringing round his weapon into his hold—a weapon which was still considered appropriate for all rural field-sports, though already long superseded by the gun in man's destruction of his own species.

Those who have only seen the child's plaything of modern times have no notion of the power of this weapon, in skilful hands, in its ancient form of construction. With this, rather than the longbow, the English of Cressy and Poitiers thinned the overwhelming legions of their enemies ere they charged with axe and bill and pike, and cleared the field. The greater distance the musket would carry, and its easier management, were, in fact, the chief advantages of that instrument of destruction over the crossbow, until modern improvements gave it so deadly a precision and power.

Robin was famed for his skill with this arm, and Tubal Bromycham's rash generosity exposed him so completely to an aim, that it was no wonder when the skilful falconer, acting upon the impulse of his own and of Phoebe's excited imagination, snatched his crossbow and launched the charmed bolt, that it reached the mark.

The unfortunate 'Wild Man' was evidently struck just as he betook himself to a more rapid flight, having, as he considered, accomplished the object of drawing attention to his movements.

It was clear, for after staggering for a moment he fell.

'It is hit in the leg, I think, and falls just like a man,' said Robin,

suddenly coming to a pause of consideration. 'I wonder whether it is a human creature, after all, and if I have shot it by mistake.'

'Let us go to the hut, and see after my poor mistress. There are plenty of people running the way of the horrid thing now,' said Phœbe; and in reality numerous figures of men and soldiers were seen scudding across the moonlit meadows in the direction of the fallen Wild Man. And to complete the certainty of detection, a greyhound emerged from some stealthy covert and joined with its unerring organs in the general chase and halloo.

In some degree fortunately, however, Robin declared to the trembling Phœbe that she had better stay where she was, while he proceeded to ascertain the real nature of the fugitive he had brought to a stop. If her lady was torn to pieces, she could do no good, and might be uncomfortably involved in the transaction. And Phœbe was prevailed upon to hide herself in the oak until her sweetheart's return from what had now become the main point of attraction in the pursuit.

On arriving, Robin found a number of soldiers and Cornet Titus engaged in tracking, with the aid of the hound, the course which the unfortunate fugitive had taken after being severely wounded, for it appeared as if he had dragged himself along the ground to a considerable distance, as no immediate traces could be found of him.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

LOVE FOR LOVE.

ARABELLA accomplished her flight in safety to the Hall, though obliged to lose some time in the *détour* she made, to avoid the danger she apprehended on her proper line of retreat.

All was still and silent there. Even the alarm of the distant musketry appeared not to have reached the drowsy inhabitants of Aston, and the young lady unobservedly re-entered by a postern door belonging to the servants' hall, and by which, under Phœbe Dewsnap's guidance, she had left the mansion.

To what an agony of doubt and misery was she not however consigned, when, sinking breathlessly exhausted on her couch, Arabella Holte felt herself once more in personal safety, but abandoned to every species of horror in reflection.

Would Tubal Bromycham escape? Was there not likelihood the Prince was so seriously injured that what happened to him must necessarily call for the severest and most betraying scrutiny.

On this latter point Arabella recalled with some hopefulness that she had left Rupert exhibiting signs of revival from the stunning effect of the violence to which his own violence had subjected him from his stronger antagonist. But even so, would not revenge and a spirit of retaliation, very likely even of a jealous character, prompt him to deliver her over to ridicule and disgrace?

And if Tubal had found it impossible to evade the danger by which he was circled in, what would be the result?

Arabella knew she could depend to the death on the fidelity and silence of her heroic smith-lover, were he even captured and at the disposal of his enemies. But what would that disposal be under circumstances so strangely mixed and aggravating?

Moreover, who could say to what extent other parties were engaged in and cognisant of the true meaning of the strange discoveries probably inevitable?

Had she so nigh fallen a victim to a concocted plot; or was Richard Grimsorwe's presence at his grandmother's cottage an accident?

Had the witch in reality exercised a potency of art in bringing her two lovers—the true and honourable, the disdainful and wrongfully-purposing one—on the scene where they had figured? Or was the whole a cunning contrivance of Richard Grimsorwe's to bring her to disgrace and ruin?

How came Tubal to appear so strangely on the scene?

Nothing but Arabella's confidence in the sincere love and generous feeling of Tubal Bromycham towards her prevented her from entertaining this latter supposition. But well she knew nothing could have induced or cajoled him into any design that might by possibility be harmful to her. But, unless by magic compelled, how came he on such a scene at such a time?

These ideas added all the horrors of remorse and regret to her dread for the safety of the brave blacksmith. And there were times, during the interval of suspense that ensued, when Arabella Holte felt as if she could scarcely restrain herself from rushing forth once more, and at every hazard ascertaining the fate of the noble-hearted man who had devoted himself with such generosity to her preservation.

What a contrast was he to the insulting royal lover, who had so plainly exhibited his notions of his superiority, and the unfair and dishonourable designs he entertained in all his pretended homage and courtship.

If Arabella Holte had not already experienced in the depths of her heart the strongest emotions of tenderness towards the chivalric and high-souled rival of that selfish and overbearing Prince, doubtless they would now have awakened in it. But it is certain which way the real affections and promptings of unbiassed female nature in her soul flowed, had not the strange perversities of opinion and of her father's will turned the true current aside.

Tubal Bromycham was surely in the ascendent now, since Arabella's principal support and consolation during the trying interval that ensued lay in recalling the fact that the witch's experiments assigned him to her as a husband. If he was now to perish, that could not be, and the decrees of fate would come to nought.

Meanwhile, if only she could be assured Tubal was safe, an evasion from her other main difficulty suggested itself to her mind.

She had already established an *alibi* by her unobserved flight and return. But, in addition, she now undressed and transferred herself to her couch, lay down on it, and put on as much semblance of slumber, in preparation for the alarm she expected, as might perhaps have deceived an ordinary observation.

Accordingly, when about an hour after her return a loud knocking came at her chamber door, and the affrighted tones of her mother demanded admission, she feigned all the process of awaking from a sound sleep with singular address, and opened it at length with only the degree of panic fairly attributable to a night-rousing of the kind.

Lady Holte appeared in a dressing-robe, hastily thrown on, and exhibited every mark of consternation natural in a person of her weak nerves and present disorder of mind.

'Arabella, my child ! my dear daughter !' she exclaimed, 'prepare yourself for bad news. Ah me, ah me ! the Prince, the Prince ! All is lost, all is lost !'

'I am prepared, dear mother, for the *very worst* !' Miss Holte replied, and truly in accents as if she meant what she said. And she did believe that all was discovered.

'Cornet Titus has just arrived at the Hall for the Prince's surgeon, and as many of his officers besides as can be at once assembled for a court-martial. You may well start, child. His Highness was taking his rounds by night, as his custom often is, alone, or with a single attendant officer, to make certain his men are at their posts, and watchful to perform their duties ; and Cornet Titus had but left him a few minutes, on orders to visit a party lying out towards Oscott Woods, when a spy of the Birmingham people came upon his Highness, quite by surprise. But yet, with his natural courage and determination, the Prince resolved upon his arrest, and in a struggle that ensued is nearly killed. The fellow almost strangled, and then dashed him with such force to the ground, that he was stunned for several minutes, and his Highness is now lying at the cottage of old Maud Grimsorwe, the wicked old witch who hates us all so, only just sufficiently recovered in his faculties to be aware of what has happened, and give immediate orders for the trial and execution of the offender. So Cornet Titus reports, who, by great good fortune, happened to overhear the noise of the struggle, and summoned help to save the Prince from actual murder ; for the villain is dreadfully strong, and had quite overpowered him.'

Lady Holte said all this, but not by any means in so regular and connected a form of narration.

'The trial and execution of the offender ! Immediate ! Tubal Bromycham a prisoner ! Tubal Bromycham to be executed !' exclaimed Arabella, now fairly aghast.

Every spark of hope, almost of vitality, seemed extinguished in her heart by these words.

'Tubal Bromycham ! How know you it is he, daughter ? Yet Tubal Bromycham it is, according to the report of Robin Falconer, who was a main instrument in his capture. Good heavens, my dear child !' Lady Holte continued, observing, though but in the moonlight, the deepening pallor and wild stare with which Arabella listened, 'you are not concerned for this villanous rebel whom your father hates so much, and who has already done so much, by his presumption and mad attachment, to cause us all uneasiness. Nothing could be better than the opportunity that occurs to be rid for ever of such a troublesome knave, were it at a

less price than this injury done the Prince, whom yet I could be well content we had never seen at Aston.'

'To be rid for ever of such a troublesome knave!—for ever! What mean you, mother? Surely, if the man is a prisoner, it is not intended to assassinate him!' gasped Arabella.

'It is plain that he has come among us a spy, so Cornet Titus says; and accordingly the Prince has determined to make an immediate example of him as such; but in all due form, to show that he presumes on no infraction of his Majesty's alleged truce with the town of Birmingham, which, nevertheless, not having been fairly accepted on their side, is of no force to protect an espial who ventures into his enemy's quarters without leave and safeguard.' So, at least, I heard the Cornet declare to Sir Thomas and some of the officers, who hastily assembled to accompany him back to Maud's hut.'

It was now little or no consolation to Arabella Holte that she plainly discerned the Prince himself, and the other parties to the transaction, had determined to give it the best public gloss they could, and altogether to omit the witchcraft occurrences.

In truth, all parties had nearly equal interest to avoid exposing their shares in the wicked intrigue. And it was plain, if Richard Grimsorwe and Titus were involved in it—which Arabella had grown strongly to suspect—they had found it advisable to assist in putting the varnish indicated on the catastrophe. Of course, they expected that Miss Holte would readily take her cue, and be glad to extricate herself from the unpleasant position at so trifling a cost—as no doubt it seemed to most of those concerned—as the life of Tubal Bromycham.

Very probably, indeed, the revengeful nature of Richard Grimsorwe exulted in bringing a person who had inflicted on himself a disgraceful chastisement to so ignominious and sudden a doom. And perhaps, if he imagined Arabella had a species of secret liking towards her outwardly scorned wooer, the pain she must suffer in consequence only added a zest to the gratification of his other rancorous animosity.

It is certain that it was he who urged upon Prince Rupert, the moment he was sufficiently recovered to attend to his suggestions, the propriety of losing not a moment in the chastisement of so insolent and outrageous an offender. And the more immediate the better, he urged, to prevent danger of a general collision with the Birmingham people, which the King might not approve, but which the prospect of saving their chief might provoke.

On the other hand, he easily convinced Cornet Titus how expedient, how necessary for all parties it was to conceal the disgraceful facts attending the scene of witchcraft. And the Cornet readily led the Prince over to his opinion, who felt that his own behaviour in the transaction was very little to his credit, and who saw his vengeance assured in another manner.

To conceal the deadly emotion she experienced on her mother's statement, and gain time for a few moments' internal reflection, Arabella inquired of Lady Holte, after a short pause, how the person accused as a spy had been taken.

What did it matter, in reality, if taken he was?

Nevertheless, Lady Holte's reply deepened what had previously seemed the complete desperation of the tidings she communicated.

'By the greatest good luck in the world,' she said, 'Robin Falconer happened to be out in the woods with his crossbow, seeking by the moonlight for an escaped heron-hawk of our mews. And hearing the wonderful alarm, and seeing a creature scud past, which, from its strange appearance, he concluded to be the Wild Man of the Woods that has of late been seen so much about here, he sent a bolt after him that hit him in the kneecap, and lamed him so that he could no longer run. But even then he crawled himself into the sedges on the bank of the great Swan Pool, and might perhaps have escaped, but that a greyhound—your greyhound, Arabella—how strange, is it not?—which you called after the Prince, darted out of some covert, joined in the chase, and discovered him bleeding and helpless there.'

New causes for bitter self-reproach and anguish on the part of Arabella Holte. Had she returned to the Fairy Tree, instead of preferring her own safety to everything else, Robin Falconer would not have remained on the theatre of events to perpetrate this crowning mischief. But for her cruel submission to the witch's decrees, the greyhound-detective would not have been there either.

'What have they done with the prisoner?' Arabella inquired, in a faint tone.

'Robin Falconer, who brings this part of the news, says that Provost Storcks, who happened to be at the outpost, has bound him so that it is impossible he should break loose, strong as he is as Samson, and he is cast into the hollow of the Fairy Oak, with a guard of musketeers, with their pieces loaded and levelled, all round it. And Robin was ordered by Richard Grimsorwe himself, who made at once to the spot on the first alarm of firing, which no one else at the Hall heard, to bring this portion of the intelligence here.'

'Richard Grimsorwe is in the whole treason, then,' thought Arabella, 'since he takes such pains to assist in giving a plausible varnish to the affairs.'

She was silent for some moments, lost in miserable and anxious reflections.

'Where is my father?' she then said to Lady Holte, with a sudden brightening and eagerness in her tones.

'Gone at once to Maud's cottage with a number of the Prince's officers, and every assistance that could be thought of at the moment,' her mother replied.

'Well, then, dear mother, we must not seem behindhand in our attentions,' said Arabella; 'let us hasten there also, with some of your damsels, to render any female help in our power. The unhappy prisoner may need some also; and surely common humanity——'

'My dearest child, you do not surely propose to drive your father furious by any display of interest in the fate of this unfortunate young man!' exclaimed Lady Holte, in great consternation. 'He will visit it upon us all, if you do.'

Arabella shuddered; but she replied, with a singular kind of dignity and fixity of resolve that in a manner awed Lady Holte into silence and

submission, 'Whatever comes of it, mother, I must, and I will do, what God and the truth, and my own heart, alike point out to me to do; and if you will not accompany me yourself to the scene of this pretended court-martial on a spy—who is none—I go alone.'

'Then you needs must, Arabella,' said the nerveless mother, sinking into a chair in a flood of tears. 'I dare not go with you, if you go in any manner to contravene your father's will.'

'Be that as it may, mother; I will never lie down with the blood of the noblest of men, and one who is altogether innocent of the offence imputed to him, on my head!'

And while yet speaking, Arabella proceeded hastily to dress herself for an outdoor excursion, while the daybreak, suddenly illumining the chamber, lit up her toilette for the operation, but seemed chiefly to warn her of the necessity of losing no time.

'Tubal Bromycham wounded—bleeding—bound! condemned to the gallows for my sake! It ought not—it shall not—it must not be!' she exclaimed; and said no more until she was ready to start on her expedition, attended by Phoebe Dewsnap—who now reappeared—and several elder female servants.

CHAPTER LXXX.

TUBAL, A PRISONER.

PHOEBE DEWSNAP's eyes looked very red on rejoining her young mistress; but she did not venture to declare why, in the presence of Lady Holte.

On the way, however, to the scene of disastrous action she crept up to Miss Holte, and whispered that she had a few words to say in private. It was a message from Tubal Bromycham, who had been brought by his captors, grievously wounded, to the Fairy Oak, while Phoebe was still in hiding there, and flung in before they were aware it had another tenant. Miserably hurt and suffering as he was, no attention being paid to his injuries other than to carry him, as he was unable to walk, the gallant blacksmith had hastily availed himself of the opportunity to bid her assure her lady that no extremity could move his fidelity, and that he died happy since he died for her.

It may be thought if this affecting additional proof of her lover's heroic attachment slackened Arabella's movement to what she intended should be to his relief from the terrible position in which he stood.

With what a different step she now advanced to that she had forced upon herself a few hours previously, in going to the witch's assignation!

Nothing could show more clearly how powerfully the moral nature of man works upon his physical one, than the now rapid and resolved gait of Arabella Holte, when her mind was conscious of a good and loving and exalted purpose.

Still, her strength of will and power alike almost yielded to the anguish

of the spectacle that awaited her at the Fairy Oak, by which she purposely directed her way to Maud Grimsorwe's hut.

As the lady and her attendants approached, they distinguished a complete circle of dismounted troopers standing at marked intervals around the tree, with their loaded carbines levelled at it, and their horses feeding, bridled and bitted, beside them.

Cornet Titus was in command of these men; and as the visitors approached, they plainly distinguished he was laughing and bandying jokes with a sinister-looking man, in a black leather uniform, who was at the same time engaged in watching the operations of another, up among the few remaining branches of the tree. On his part, this latter was engaged in strongly securing a rope to a projection, which dangling down, showed that it finished in a hangman's slip-noose.

These two latter persons were Provost-Marshal Storcks and Robin Falconer, who was assisting in the preparations to finish off a victim whom he doubtless looked upon from his own point of view—of a loyalist vassal of the house of Holte, and gamekeeper—as a most pernicious criminal.

Yet all these dreadful and significant adjuncts of the scene were, perhaps, of less horror than what was discerned on a nearer approach. A stream of bright red blood was flowing from the oak, as from a slaughter-house; and though no sound of complaint or suffering came from the interior, it could be little doubted but that the emptying veins of the captive supplied the source.

Arabella perceived this the moment she arrived at the cordon placed round the tree, and although Titus, observing the approach, advanced to intercept it, a few steps beyond his carbineers.

'What do you want, madam?' he said, puzzled and even alarmed at her extraordinary expression; 'it is only a Birmingham villain, who assailed the Prince's Highness, that is confined within there.'

Arabella pointed, with a ghastly and really terrible glare, from the Cornet to the crimson soaking of the grass before the opening into the hollow old oak.

'I wish to bandage the poor man's wounds,' she replied. 'Surely, ye are not quite wolves to desire his blood to lap!'

'What is the use, madam? The court-martial must nigh have finished its proceedings, and there can be no doubt what will be the result to so notorious a seditioner and spy. The fellow's gallows is already slung,' returned the officer, indicating the halter and its noose with a malicious smile.

'The court-martial! Tubal Bromycham a spy! No, no; but at least he is not condemned to bleed to death now and at once. Give me way, sir!'

'Take it, madam. But I warn you, Miss Holte,' Titus continued, in a low tone, accompanying the lady to the tree; 'Richard Grimsorwe has informed the Prince of your old affair with this Birmingham smith, and what is suspected in the matter. Do not by your conduct support his malignant insinuations.'

'Nest of serpent betrayers and perjurers. I care nothing for anything you can all do now. O Tubal, Tubal! dear, faithful lover of mine! speak, if you yet live!'

The exclamation was very naturally occasioned when, entering the species of narrow-circular chamber formed by the hollow trunk of the ancient tree, Arabella perceived the unfortunate object of her search. Tubal lay crouched in a most uncomfortable position, his arms being pinioned behind him to his heels by strong ropes, pallid as death itself, with the gore oozing from his wounded knee, both his eyes closed, and a cold sweat of agony bathing his excruciated features. Silent, nevertheless, as an Indian at the stake.

The sound of Arabella's voice acted like a charm. Tubal's clenched brows relaxed, he opened his faint and swimming eyes, and a bright effulgence broke over all his visage as he slowly recognised the beloved form.

Yet still he remembered what was confided, he deemed, to his faithful secrecy.

'Gentle Mistress Holte here?' he said, in a tone of respectful gratitude; 'this indeed sweetens death! And if you come to announce it, lady, my sentence itself will still sound like music in my ears.'

'Dearest Tubal! you are wounded grievously. I hope yet to save you, but if you bleed to death meanwhile—let me bandage your wound,' said Arabella, brokenly; and flinging herself in a passion of grief and remorse beside the wounded man, she tremulously but resolutely produced a pair of scissors, with which she commenced cutting away the covering of the injured limb.

But Tubal endeavoured, as well as his fettered condition allowed him, to decline this service.

'Nay, dear lady,' he said, while his whole countenance grew in its lustrous intensity of love and strange expression of delight, 'trouble not yourself, and me, for the little space that remains. My destruction is certain, at the hands of my enraged enemies; and if I can die of this welling of my life-blood forth, it were best for me, and will spare the last Lord of Birmingham's perishing by a felon's doom. Best for me in other ways, dearest Arabella,' he continued, in deeply moved and tenderly-consoling tones, doubtless observing the young lady's look of anguished dissent; 'for since you can never be mine, my suffering in that knowledge and belief have reconciled me very heartily to die!'

'But I *will* be yours, Tubal, if you will only live to make me so! I swear it! At least, I will never be another's. No temptation, no force, shall ever alter my resolve; and so I will proclaim to all the world at once, if only you will live to recompense my devotion by your love! And now will you let your plighted wife, Tubal, tent your wound?' Arabella exclaimed.

'Heavenly powers! but this is a cruel happiness!' Tubal replied. 'Yes, I could live for ever on such a promise, but my foes will not suffer it. And, besides, beloved Arabella! only a surgeon's, or a blacksmith's, pincers could relieve me of my main hurt. The crossbow-bolt is sticking in the joint of my knee, which disabled me in my flight, and even by its overmastering agony subdued me into a swoon, from the purpose I entertained, of rather drowning in the pool near which I fell, than falling alive into the hands of my enemies.'

'I will draw it out, if need be, with my teeth alone! But perchance

some grasp may remain to the bolt,' Arabella eagerly replied, proceeding in her humane task.

Phoebe Dewsnap was by this time by her mistress's side, with a sponge and various other articles, hastily provided with a view to the use they were now turned to, though ostensibly to be of service in the Prince's injuries. And she now lent her handy assistance, clamouring at the same time to Robin Falconer to leave off playing hangman's 'prentice, and bring some water.

The falconer, who began confusedly to comprehend he was somehow in the wrong in the zealous assistance he was rendering, slid down from the oak at once, and hastily obeyed the orders he received.

It was a piece of singular good hap, in the midst of so much disaster, that on Tubal's wound being washed the head of the crossbow-bolt plainly appeared. It was, however, so deeply and strongly embedded in the knee-bone, that all Arabella Holte's efforts to remove it must have been futile but for Robin Falconer's aid, in the absence of the usual surgical instruments for an extraction of the kind. After trying his own strength for some minutes in vain, in consequence of the slight hold remaining above the bone to the bolt, he disappeared from the hut for a moment. Then, reappearing with a pair of forceps, he quaintly remarked, 'I saw where the Prince's surgeon put his tools, when he found they were not wanting for *him*;' and applying the instrument with considerable dexterity—under Arabella's directions—he proceeded to wrench out the cause of suffering, by the exertion of all his strength, in unison with the mechanical power.

We will not speak of the superhuman agony undergone by Tubal Bromycham during this rough operation. Some groans were wrung even from his strong breast, while his countenance writhed all over with the severity of the sufferings inflicted. But he fixed his straining eyes on Arabella, and seemed to derive power to endure every extremity of pain from the intense and absorbed expression of love and agonised sympathy in hers. But when the bolt yielded at last, and was in a manner torn out of the bone it was fixed in, even Tubal's mighty power of endurance gave way, and with a shriek of agony he swooned away. He revived to find Arabella tenderly bathing his visage with fresh cold water, and that his wounded limb was carefully bandaged in linen and twisted tow. But it seemed to him that the hot tears which rained from her eyes over him did more to revive him than the cooler fluid, or the sense of relief from the excessive pain that had previously tormented him. He could only, however, look his gratitude: speech was denied him.

Precisely at this moment also the figure of Cornet Titus appeared at the entrance of the hollow tree, indicating the scene within to a person whom Arabella recognised, with a vague and indifferent sense of surprise, as Count O'laafe; probably returned, by a remarkable coincidence at so strange a conjuncture of events, from his mission to the King.

'Is it not all as I tell you, Count? And will the Prince need any other remedy for his silly passion but a true report of this scene?' Titus said, without any effort to conceal his malignant satisfaction.

'I should say not! The whole thing puzzles me amazingly!—I would

not stand between his Highness and his just vengeance. And yet the King's orders are strangely peremptory, and I come upon a hot spur, I can tell you ! But let me see the Prince at once ; the circumstances may justify rigour, since the ruffian is also a notorious traitor and spy !' Count O'Taafe replied, raising his hat to Miss Holte ; who, however, took no manner of notice of the politeness, continuing absorbed in her loving task.

The Count and the Cornet exchanged some further whispered observations ; and then the former, murmuring, ' Let her do what she likes. By all means let her expose herself as much as possible ; only keep the prisoner safe,' moved onward from the tree in the direction pointed out to him as Prince Rupert's quarters, for the time, at Maud's hut.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

ON arrival, and entering at the open door, Count O'Taafe found a very unusual company assembled under that lowly roof. Nearly all the officers of the royal cavalry stationed at Aston Hall were present, engaged in a noisy and excited confabulation round their chief.

Prince Rupert himself sat on the witch's unsavoury couch, looking very pale, for he had not long been bled by his surgeon, who was engaged in binding his arm ; while Sir Thomas Holte, officiously assisting, held the bright steel basin which had much more reverently received that royal fluid than the earth had drunk the heroic blood of Tubal Bromycham.

Perhaps the remedy was proper enough in this case, in the state of ferocious excitement to which Rupert revived from his overthrow by the Birmingham smith. But it was at that period almost the invariable first move of the mediciner's art to bleed a patient. No matter what his malady, exhaustion or otherwise—bleed, bleed, bleed !

In this instance the remedy had certainly produced but little effect to moderate the exasperation and violence of the furious patient's passions. The moment his glance fell upon O'Taafe, though he had not seen him for now several weeks, and his return was unexpected, the Prince exclaimed, ' Ha, Count ! do you bring me the King's permission to let myself loose on this whole perfidious and audacious people in their town ?'

O'Taafe was about to commence his reply by some expressions of condolence at the sad condition in which he found his Prince, when the latter fiercely interrupted him.

' I do not ask for pity, man ! I hate it—I abhor it ! I want vengeance ! Not on one alone, but on all these traitors ! Does the King consent ?'

' We are all friends here, I think ?' said O'Taafe, glancing round the assembly, and only pausing with a moment's hesitation as his eye fell on the countenance of Richard Grimsorwe, lit with a fiendish expression of triumph even in the darkness of the recess where he had stationed himself.

'All, Count! Speak with every imaginable freedom,' returned Rupert, impetuously.

'I will then, sir; and I grieve to say that his Majesty has most strictly forbidden any violation of his protection granted Birmingham until—until he has re-established his royal authority by the overthrow of his open rebels in the field,' replied O'Taafe, evidently to his own distaste; but adding, in a cheerfuller tone, 'and to this intent, his Majesty being now most wonderfully thronged to by his loyal subjects of all degrees, and set up in an army amply sufficient for the purpose, proposes to march at once by way of these cities and provinces upon London. It is no wonder, therefore, that his civilian prompters and counsellors have persuaded him how needful it is not to add to the obstacles on his march, or to the vexations on his rear, by provoking the people of these parts into open hostility and rebellion. But I bring you, Prince, his Majesty's appointment to the supreme command of his cavalry, and instructions to advance with all the force you have, or can gather in, to cover his projected movement from the west. And by way of further consolation, his royal plight and word that, as soon as ever his authority is re-established in London, you shall have an altogether free and unfettered commission to reduce these counties to the utterest submission, and visit upon all concerned in the recent seditions in Birmingham the utmost punishment of their offences.'

Rupert seemed but little mollified by the statement, though an object of ambition was thus assured him he had been for some time passionately striving after, but which the King, his uncle, had not at first dared to confer upon so young a leader.

'What! the Birmingham knaves go scot-free until their London aiders and abettors meet their deserts!' he exclaimed. 'Well! for the mass of them, if it must be so, let it be so. But this traitorous spy—this audacious *boute-feu* (incendiary), who is in our hands, he shall die the death, if the King stood here in person to say no. The law-martial overrides every other. Gentlemen, what say you? I have explained to you how I found the rascal prowling about in my camp as a spy; Master Grimsorwe has told you how he is the very heart and hand of the whole revolt of the town of Birmingham; needs there any more witnesses to send the rogue to the gallows?'

'And lose not a moment about it, gentlemen, I do advise you, or you will have a swarm of those madmen out to the rescue, and a general pell-mell and massacre, which will be of great injury to his Majesty's affairs,' chimed in the malicious Grimsorwe.

'So say I, gentlemen. You will rid the whole neighbourhood here of a most pestilent disturber and ill-conditioned fellow, as well as deprive the Birminghamers of their only leader that is truly to be dreaded in that capacity. A mechanic rogue, too, forsooth, who sets himself up for Lord of Birmingham,' subjoined Sir Thomas Holte, with perhaps a still more inhuman and rancorous eagerness, considering how heavily the balance of wrong inclined against himself to Tubal Bromycham. But his pride and self-will, and probably no slight consciousness of danger to be apprehended in that direction, urged him to assist in the destruction.

And yet, as plainly appeared, Sir Thomas was unaware of the abundant increase of reasons for his fears which had arisen within so brief a time. He looked completely startled and bewildered when Count O'Taafe exclaimed, 'I am glad to hear you say so, Sir Thomas, for not a minute ago I left your daughter, Miss Holte, attending and succouring this rebel, with much more devotion and zeal than methinks it is likely she would bestow on any of us, the King's most faithful soldiers, or even on his royal nephew himself, whom she seems to have postponed to visit until the occasions of the wounded renegade in question are fully served.'

'You are raving, of a surety, Count O'Taafe,' replied Sir Thomas vehemently; 'and I have already shown to you all, I will permit no idle tampering in anything that concerns my daughter's name.'

'You have only told me *half* the truth, then, Master Grimsorwe,' Rupert said, with similar passion. 'And this insolent blacksmith's pretensions to your father's daughter have met with her approval and acceptance too.'

'Impossible, Prince! Your Highness knows not what you say. It was my daughter herself revealed the knave's presumption to me, and thereby justified the disgraceful punishment to which I subjected him in the village stocks,' exclaimed Sir Thomas.

'Here she comes—here my *poor sister* comes—to answer for herself. She will soon disprove this absurd notion your Highness has taken, so far as regards her,' said Grimsorwe, much agitated, catching a view from where he stood of the approach of the young lady, now quite alone. He knew not what to think of the singular revolution the affair had undergone; but aware of his own villanous proceedings, trembled at any possibility of exposure.

'Let us get rid of the seditious scoundrel then, in the first instance,' Rupert upon this exclaimed, with his usual impetuosity. 'What say you, gentlemen? You are a regularly enow constituted court-martial for the trial of so notorious an offender, whom I myself detected in these enclosures, and who resisted me to the hazard of my life, which he attempted with a brutish peasant violence. Do you not find this Tubal Bromycham came as a spy into our quarters, and as such is worthy of the gibbet?'

'There can be no doubt in such a case, your Highness; but the King's commands are so positive. Let us put it formally to the vote,' said Count O'Taafe, anxious to relieve himself from a responsibility he felt rather likely to be cast upon him. 'Do you condemn this Tubal Bromycham, then, for a spy in the quarters of his Highness the Prince?'

'Say no, sirs! for ye cannot so condemn Tubal Bromycham with any right or justice,' said the bright, fierce, resolved accents of Arabella Holte, who at this moment stepped into the hut, with the majesty of a goddess descending to the rescue of some favourite champion of pagan romance, and with much of some such celestial's absence of mortal dreads and considerations. So fixed, indeed, in her resolves and utterances, that Destiny herself could scarcely have seemed more so. Pale, it is true, as marble, but as impenetrable and settled in her expression of determination.

A general silence was struck into all present by this arrival, and the words that accompanied it.

Her father appeared to be the first who recovered from the surprise. 'What say you, foolish girl?' he exclaimed, and yet very confusedly. 'How concerns it you what happens to this man? He is justly condemned as a spy, wandering, as he did, within these forbidden precincts.'

'No, sir; Tubal Bromycham is not in Aston as a spy. He came here last midnight, as I myself came here last midnight, as the Prince came here last midnight—by the enforcement of a magic spell set in action by the witch-grandmother of your traitorous bastard yonder, Richard Grimsorwe. The Prince cannot deny what I say, on his faith and honour as a true man and gentleman; but I have other witnesses. And I say that at my request, and to win the reward I promised her, Maud Grimsorwe undertook to show me, by her sorcerer's craft, who must be my husband by the decrees of fate. And it proved *not* to be this Royal Prince, but the brave blacksmith, leader of the people of Birmingham, whom, for my own part, and with all my heart and soul, I do accept as such !'

There was another still more astonished pause of utter silence; and again it was Sir Thomas Holte who broke it. 'Good Lord!' he exclaimed; 'one thing at least is plain, is certain—my child is, and must be bewitched, to utter such madness as this. Where is the hellish sorceress, that I may fling her myself into the flames.'

'I am not mad, father. No; nor *now* bewitched! I was bewitched when I subjected myself to the meanness and disgrace of endeavouring to win a man who considers me fit enough to be his mistress, but not his wife; who has openly shown so. Prince, can you deny it?'

Rupert looked at the lady with a most extraordinary change and brightening up of expression. His proud and fierce nature was stirred by the whole surprising act of courage and self-assertion, in a very different manner than might have been expected. It is true, besides, that Arabella Holte never appeared more supremely beautiful, more royal by nature, fitter to mate with the loftiest and most leonine, than on this momentous occasion. No doubt, also, Rupert had conceived a stronger passion for the lovely and brilliant companion of so many pleasures and leisure hours as he had shared during his visit at Aston, than he himself was aware, and which burst into an extraordinary flame in his impetuous temperament, thus contraried by events. Love, pride, jealousy, revenge—shame at the prospect of a fuller exposure of the violence he had attempted against the honour of his host and of an unprotected woman, in the presence of such an audience, all conspired to drive the Prince upon the singular resolution he adopted at once. Moreover, the royal trooper's passions, violent as they were, were extremely devoid of delicacy and sentiment.

To the astonishment of all who listened, he replied, 'No, Miss Holte; I do not, I cannot deny your accusation; but I trust I shall make ample amends for whatever has hitherto been amiss in my conduct towards you and your family, and falsify the pretension of witchcraft which, I suppose, this spy fellow also relies upon, by declaring that I am willing at

this very moment to give you my hand in marriage, under your father's sanction, provided you will prove to me it is not true you have a preference for yonder vile rebel, by withdrawing your plea for him, and consigning him freely to the gallows.'

There was indeed now a more awful pause of astonishment and suspense than had yet taken place. Sir Thomas himself could not speak for eagerness, and turned to his daughter with his mouth wide open for utterance, but unable to articulate a single word of entreaty.

No words, however, could have been more eloquent; and it is probable that the strongest emotion that struggled in Arabella's breast after the avowal, was prompted by her sorrow at the disappointment she was obliged to give her father in reply. Possibly, she even hesitated for a brief instant on her own account, on so unexpected an opportunity of gratifying what had hitherto been the master-impulses of her nature. But, to the credit of all womanhood, and of her own noble, though so long perverted heart, Arabella Holte vanquished the temptation. The image of the generous Tubal, sacrificing all for her—bound, wounded, bleeding, suffering—to be consigned upon her word to a death of ignominy, that she might wed with a cruel and relentless rival, arose almost actually before her gaze, and she shrunk back from the Prince's extended hand.

'You are generous, Prince,' she yet strove to say. 'You have achieved a noble triumph over yourself. But it is too late; my affections and my most sacred pledge are Tubal Bromycham's. Exhibit yourself, then, still more princely and heroic in another form. Acknowledge the justice of my appeal; release your cruelly maltreated and all but dying antagonist; who, in his turn, spared you when you were still more completely at his mercy, and win my everlasting applause and gratitude. Or let me share whatever doom you inflict on Tubal, on my lover; the only husband ever I shall wed, happen what will!'

'Madwoman! I tell you all, sirs; I assure your Highness, all this that she is saying is because she is bewitched. The hag of this hovel's devils are speaking in her. Where is she? I will make her confess as much, if there be any skill in thumbikins and fire,' roared Sir Thomas Holte.

'Faith, I think you are all bewitched together!' shouted O'Taafe, quite bewildered by his royal patron's last strange outburst. 'And so I will inform the King, if a stop is not put to all this nonsense at once.'

Rupert had been silent since his impetuous movement, swallowing to the dregs the bitter cup of mortification forced on his unaccustomed lips.

He now spoke up, in as unusual a tone, for him, of satirical and suppressed rage.

'A stop shall be put, Count O'Taafe, on so much as regards myself, the nephew of the King!' he said. 'Gentlemen, our court-martial is dissolved, and the prisoner dismissed unharmed upon this reasonable plea raised for him by Mistress Holte. For there can be no doubt we are all labouring under some witchcraft, delusion, and temptation—the

man of Birmingham as well as we at Aston. Moreover, I cannot but feel it would be most ungenerous of me to deprive Miss Holte of so distinguished a husband, and Sir Thomas Holte of so distinguished a son-in-law, whose descent, I am told, is of little less antiquity, and scarcely more impoverishment than mine own, and who, if not a soldier, is of the next honourable craft in some nations' reckoning ! And so I advise you to join your daughter's hand with this brawny blacksmith's forthwith, Sir Thomas, and send the bride and bridegroom home at once to house-keeping in Birmingham. For me, I will to horse as instantly, and be halfway on my road to Shrewsbury ere sunset of this foolish day !

'Miserable girl ! madwoman ! And as a madwoman I will keep you henceforth a captive on bread and water, in chains, and straw, and a dark room, until you acknowledge yourself as such—from this husband of yours, forsooth !' yelled Sir Thomas Holte, now in reality himself fairly frantic with rage ; and seizing his daughter by the arm, he tore her furiously away. 'Come, if you would avoid my curse in addition, I say !' he continued, dragging her with a cruelly violent precipitation after him, perceiving that she turned as if again to address the Prince. But still Arabella, with a truly admirable sustaining of resolution, called out to Rupert, 'Keep good faith with me, Prince ; or the hand of a madwoman, indeed, shall avenge Tubal Bromycham !' resigned herself to her father's violent will.

It may be thought that Sir Thomas did not suffer his unhappy child to return to Aston Hall by the way of the Fairy Oak !

CHAPTER LXXXII.

A REAL SPY.

As a first consequence of the events described, Aston Hall and its neighbourhood were almost immediately afterwards relieved of the presence of Prince Rupert and his Cavaliers.

Very seasonably, it was thought in Birmingham, when the principal leader and champion of the town was brought back to it in so maimed and disconsolate a condition as Tubal Bromycham appeared in, when a flag of truce announced the approach, and half-a-dozen troopers carried him on a hurdle to the barriers of the town, and there left him.

He was found to be grievously wounded in the knee, though carefully bandaged, and insensible with loss of blood. Nor was he able for a considerable period after to give any account how he came in his deplorable condition, a fever and delirium ensuing. But it could pretty well be guessed, since he was returned from Aston by the enemy.

Tubal was conveyed home to the Moat-House, where he was immediately attended by a crowd of sympathising friends.

Firebrace and his daughter were earnestly conspicuous among these ; but even Dame Cooper, who had quite taken a liking for her former dispossession, devoted herself now with almost as kindly zeal to nurse and restore him, as if she had been his mother. As for the townspeople of Birmingham, to whom Tubal's popular and heroic qualities had so

long endeared him, nothing could exceed their grief and indignation when they heard what had befallen him.

Sisyphus and his dark alliance made some efforts to take advantage of this feeling to stir up a renewal of tumult and violence. But the departure of Rupert and his troops removed the principal objects of dislike and vengeance. Moreover, the other chiefs and elders of the town grew more than ever disinclined to hazard further exhibitions of hostility to the royal cause ; and for the very good reason, that reports were now rife of a great army collecting round the King, which it was natural to suppose would speedily be on the march, and in a condition to execute any kind of vengeance he might ordain.

Pretexts were also wanting ; for if Tubal Bromycham's injuries enabled one side to call for vengeance, on the other the King's favourers could declare that his being restored to his friends alive was a most convincing proof of his Majesty's and his officers' goodwill to preserve the truce, or peace, agreed upon. It was plain he had ventured into the enemy's quarters, for whatever reason, and might fairly have been treated as a spy. And when Tubal himself revived to a sense of things, he gave a most favourable version of his treatment, and forbade any attempt whatever at reprisal on the inhabitants of Aston, who were left now comparatively without defence.

Even Edward Holte and his troopers were destined shortly after to be withdrawn from Sutton.

He received orders, couched in a friendly style, but no longer to be evaded without open disobedience, from Prince Rupert, as General of the King's Horse, to join him at Shrewsbury. And the sadness of this parting for the husband-lover, so he continued, was at once heightened and soothed in an extraordinary degree by the revelation which Dorothy then felt it necessary to make, that there was every probability of his becoming in some few months a father.

The circumstance, both felt, must soon render it inevitable, for the preservation of the fair fame of the wife of Edward Holte, to avow their marriage. But the dangers and perplexities of such a revelation were sufficiently clear, and seemed even increased by the state of affairs at Aston Hall. Sir Thomas Holte appeared to his family and servants, accustomed as they were to his tyrannies, to have become a real mad-man, in the extraordinary way he was going on.

When, at Tubal's entreaties, the moment he could explain his motives, Edward made a visit to Aston Hall to inquire after his sister, Sir Thomas refused to allow him to see her. He bitterly reproached his son with being capable of strengthening her obstinacy against the splendid alliance which, he haughtily declared, he had brought about for her, and which he was determined she should consent to. But Edward learned from his mother's terrified hints that Arabella was consigned to a captivity of strange severity in some of the upper apartments of the house, to hinder her, according to Sir Thomas, from running away from an offer of marriage with a Prince, to the arms of a beggarly mechanic. The poor lady herself was denied to see her child, who was subjected to much other surprising harshness in the way of diet and deprivation of society.

Edward Holte was not only sincerely grieved on his sister's account at this state of things, but his own difficulties and perils were evidently increased by all he learned concerning the reason of her maltreatment.

Tubal, of course, knew only what happened between himself and her, and was ignorant of the means by which his release had been brought about. But Sir Thomas's gorgeous boasts, and his furious demeanour on finding his will thwarted in the exaltation of his family, showed Edward plainly what he had himself to expect in a discovery of his secret marriage. And, moreover, he was at liberty to apprehend Arabella's resistance to the royal offer made her, if made it was, would not last long under such pressure. And he could scarcely doubt it was the case; for the haughty old man answered the remonstrances he ventured with a fierce declaration that the Prince had actually made it, and in the hearing of Richard Grimsorwe and the chief part of his officers. The exact circumstances, however, he would not detail, and Edward disdained to question his sullen bastard brother. But now, if the event should really come to pass, the baronet's pride would swell beyond all limits, and he would look upon Edward's misalliance with a thousand times more exasperated eyes.

Tubal's emotions on receiving so much intelligence as could thus be gathered were curiously mixed.

Joy and triumph, unbounded love, contended in his heart with grief and indignation at the maltreatment of Arabella Holte on his account. Amazement that she should in reality have so far vanquished her ruling passions; that her love of him should have achieved so magnificent a triumph over her ambition, struggled continually in his reflections, with dread that it could not really be, or that she could not resist continued temptation. All this kept up the fever in his veins, caused at first by loss of blood and the anguish of his wound. And this last was of such a nature as condemned him to physical powerlessness, keeping him confined to a couch, with a mind thus cruelly preyed upon by hope and fear.

And now, to crown all, Tubal's sole chances of intelligence from Aston were taken from him by the departure of Edward Holte. This could certainly no longer be delayed, unless the lovers were prepared to lose their last hope of aid in the favour of the King. But before he departed Dorothy requested and obtained of her young husband a full written acknowledgment of her as his wife, and his unborn offspring as legitimately so.

Dorothy wished for this, besides her marriage certificate, to satisfy her father and friends in case her situation should become apparent before an open declaration became prudent. It was impossible to say how long Edward might be forced to remain absent, or whether the war would in reality be directed into those parts so immediately as was believed, and hoped, by some. And strange to say, though Dorothy concealed the fact, to avoid as much as possible annoying her husband, there were already some whisperings on the subject of their intimate communion in the town.

How arisen it is difficult to say. Dame Cooper certainly kept the

secret very well of the meetings of the wedded lovers, at the Moat-House, by her friendly connivance.

Perhaps her babbling husband might have hinted in his cups at certain wonders he could reveal, 'an he would.' And there have always been plenty of ears to hear, and tongues to report and gloze upon anything of scandalous import, in towns.

Then again the housekeeper at Sutton, being of the following of Sisyphus the bellows-blower, might have allowed herself to be pumped by him of statements concerning Edward Holte's frequent nocturnal absences from his home. And truly the Anabaptist had not ceased to take an interest in the affairs of the Firebrace family, although he had been dismissed entirely from their service, and, since his defeat in the attempt to excite an insurrection, had been rejected from all the workshops, and compelled to eke out a starving livelihood how he best might.

Richard Grimsorwe's scanty and begrudging purse very possibly supplied some portion of these means. And yet this worthy himself purchased chiefly his own discomfort and exasperation.

From all he heard, and the collected reports of his spies, Grimsorwe could not doubt the success of his brother's love with the Armourer's fair daughter.

This pained him on divers scores. Not that he had any real passion for her himself. But he was a debauchee of the worst order, almost indiscriminate in his animal attachments, and his own brutal insolence had made him aware of the surpassing physical beauty of Dorothy Firebrace. He regretted thus, severely, that Edward should have carried off so fine a prize. He had always hated and envied his handsome brother for all the advantages he possessed over himself, and now this was added to all. Then Dorothy's great contempt and hatred of him stimulated Grimsorwe to revenge. But, so far as we have now spoken, his objects in keeping up an espial on his brother, in this respect, were chiefly prompted by a hope and expectation to expose Dorothy to shame and chastisement in her Puritan town, confirm his calumnies of her to his father, and give his brother a kind of mortification, to which he thought him very susceptible. It had not entered Grimsorwe's selfish and base heart to conceive that even Edward Holte, chivalric fool as he deemed him, would hazard so great an injury to himself as to effect an honourable union with the object of his love.

But a revelation on this score awaited the traitor also. Not alone the fruit of bribery. Sisyphus's own malignant nature and insane passion for Dorothy Firebrace made the work of betrayal pleasant to him, and prompted a subtlety and daring no other causes could.

On the day assigned for Edward Holte's departure with his troop to join the King's army in the West, the youthful wedded pair ventured for almost the first time to prolong their parting interview till daybreak. This, however, seemed of the less consequence, as Firebrace had given permission to his daughter to remain at the Moat-House with Dame Cooper, in attendance on Tubal during the worst of his illness, and the window of her apartment was purposely low to the ground, and opened on a drawbridge over the Moat; which passed, the open country was before a person leaving by it.

After exchanging every imaginable vow of constancy, after weeping in each other's arms for hours, and parting half-a-dozen times ere they could resolve upon the final one, the fond young husband and wife did, however, at length tear themselves asunder. But unhappily Edward, on reaching the drawbridge, could not forbear from a yearning backward gaze, and Dorothy, persuading herself that he had something of importance yet to say, stepped out of her apartment and hastened to him there.

A renewed, protracted, and tender adieu ensued, until the appearance of people on the public road beyond compelled Dorothy to withdraw. Then, returning to her chamber, she was so oppressed with grief and sad forebodings that for a long time after she did not notice the important circumstance that the paper of acknowledgment Edward had written no longer remained on the table, where he had duly signed and sealed it.

Dorothy was convinced she had last seen it there; yet the most diligent search failed to recover the document. She then concluded Edward must accidentally, or in forgetfulness, have taken it with him, and she despatched Dame Cooper, her diligent ally, to Sutton, to ascertain. But the young captain of horse had already set out on his march several hours. All that could be done was to await till she could know where to write to Edward, to inquire the safety of the papers.

Of this, however, Dorothy had little doubt. It was true she had left the window by which she quitted her chamber open to facilitate her return. But it seemed impossible that any one could have the means or the inclination to enter the apartment, and carry off a piece of paper as sole trophy of his audacity. From the exterior, the house was effectually guarded by its circle of water, excepting at the drawbridge, on which she had stood. As regarded the interior, her door was strongly secured by bolts and a lock within.

And so Dorothy comforted herself; never for a moment entertaining any possible suspicion that her Edward could have purposely withdrawn the document, on consideration of the embarrassments to himself its production might entail.

And in this trust she was well justified; not in her hopeful explanations to herself.

Somewhere about this very hour when Dame Cooper returned from her fruitless errand to Sutton, Sisyphus the bellows-blower met Richard Grimsorwe, as was often their custom, in a secluded by-path between Birmingham and Aston Hall.

It was agreed that if they were observed the latter should pretend to beg. On this occasion he rather seemed to offer something very acceptable, to judge from the sudden voracity with which Richard Grimsorwe snatched at a parcel handed to him by the bellows-blower.

'You watched him into the Moat-House, into her chambers?' said Grimsorwe. 'You waded the water and saw him writing this paper at her dictation? You watched him out again at daybreak, concealed in the muddy ditch; saw her hasten yet again in amorous lingering after him, and, at the hazard of your life, hooked me it from the open window forth? If it is a *promise of marriage*, as you suspect, good friend,

though you cannot read, you have, indeed, earned better than a silver tester by your night's work, this time ! All the fiends of hell ! What is here ? Edward married ! Edward the probable father of a legitimate heir to Aston Hall !

The paper fell from the almost paralysed hand of the bastard pretender to the Holte inheritance, and he stood for some minutes even, gazing in a blank astonishment of dismay and horror at his accomplice.

On his part, Sisyphus's ill-omened visage blackened as if he was strangling with the violence of his internal emotion.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE REIGN OF THE SAINTS.

CERTAINLY the feelings of neither of these wicked men were to be envied at the moment of their interchange of tidings.

'Married ! Edward Holte married to the girl whom I intended to—whom I—whom, if ever I attained the mastery in Birmingham—she a wife ! Dorothy Firebrace likely to become the mother of the children of my hated enemy ; poor, powerless, maimed wretch that I am !' ejaculated Sisyphus ; not so incoherently, however, but that Richard Grimsorwe's active intellect pieced to him a new and extraordinary meaning in what he heard.

'You too, then, you love—you love my brother's wife, bellows-blower ! *My brother's wife*, I tell you ! It is most plainly written down here. The when, the where, the how, the very priest's name ! And sleek-and-sly Master Lane, you must meddle and make in it, must you ? I never thought my brother such an idiot before, or this wench so wondrous artful. Yet here it stands on record, in his own handwriting, with his own signature, his own seal, that he is the lawful husband of Dorothy Firebrace, and father of her unborn child !

'Vengeance, vengeance on the wretch, with his flowing curls !' said Sisyphus, grinding his teeth with fury. 'Hasten at once with this paper to Sir Thomas, Master Grimsorwe, and let him disinherit our fine bridegroom, and separate them for ever.'

'But would that so surely follow ? And even so, were it vengeance worth the name ? But it would not. I know my brother's good faith and loving constancy of nature ; he would never prove false to his wife, or desert her for any favour or fear. And who can say that my father may not relent when he finds the matter cannot be helped, and that the only lawful heirs of his name must be born of this daughter of a Birmingham smith ?' said Grimsorwe. 'No !' he resumed with fury, as his rapid invention in mischief suggested a plan to him, 'No ; Edward's wife must first be disgraced and dishonoured before my father is informed of the event ; and to such extent that he, and even Edward himself, perchance, shall deem the alliance infamy, and her children be scandalised too doubtfully in their parentage ever to lay claims to the inheritance of Aston Hall. Yes, Sisyphus, if there be any remains of sense and con-

trivance in my brain, this insolent beauty—this wife—this mother—shall be reduced to a vileness and scorn that will make her the loathing of the basest populace of Birmingham; worthy even of the destiny you have projected for her in your arms. Your arms! you have only one.'

'It is true,' Sisyphus replied; 'but I have a hook by which I could drag a Spanish treasure-ship from the depths of the sea. But cunning, however, will serve us better than strength in such a turn as you advise, and which would be revenge indeed. Nor am I a stiff fool, of pampered diet, to reject my food for a little swinish handling. How purpose you to effect so notable a retaliation?'

It was wonderful how rapidly Grimsorwe had devised his villanous scheme of counteraction. He poured forth a statement at once of his plans, in which everything seemed contrived and arranged down to the most trifling minutiae, and the parts assigned to all the intended players in the tragic interlude. But the reader will find it best explained in the action.

Sisyphus readily promised his concurrence, though the share assigned him was not altogether to his taste. Yet there were reconciling portions in it; not the least being that Tubal Bromycham, his recent overthrower, was to come in for a portion of the harmful results, and that it was not improbable these would include the placing of Dorothy Firebrace's person in his power.

The state of affairs in Birmingham at this time rendered the extraordinary plans of those two devilish men possible, which under almost any other circumstances could scarce have been so. Grimsorwe was kept very well informed by his Anabaptist spies of all that occurred there, and on this information based his plot.

Tubal Bromycham's wound and confinement to a fevered couch rendered it unnecessary to take resistance on his part into consideration. Already, since his active interference was over, and the dangers vanished that compelled men to place their reliance in his courage and qualities as a leader, his power in Birmingham was singularly shrunk; moreover, the fanaticism of the times had taken a curious form of development there, opposed to any other supremacy, under the guidance of the three-parts insane enthusiast, Wrath-of-God Whitehall.

Resuming his old name of Kingdom-Come, Whitehall had set himself up as what he styled a Judge and Ruler in Israel; and professing to restore a Scriptural purity and simplicity of discipline in all things, civil as well as religious, actually administered justice and oracles of faith alike, directly out of the Bible, in open and daily assemblages of the people, in the market-place of Birmingham.

All other rules of law and government were contemptuously set aside, and declared null and of no authority.

The King's name was no longer used, nor any reference made to Acts of Parliament, in the decisions pronounced. The only sovereign was announced to be the heavenly one, whose personal advent on earth was hourly expected, and passionately prayed for. And, meanwhile, the people were to be governed in the name of King Jesus, by his Vice-gerent, Whitehall, and a body of twenty-four Elders, whom he associated with himself in the office.

Such was the humour of the times that the extraordinary severities of discipline introduced by this madman and his coadjutors, from the laws of the Mosaic dispensation, found a ready allowance among by far the majority of the people of Birmingham.

Men's minds were on the strain for novelties and surprises equally in religion and politics, and found exercise and relief in a form of development which was besides promised to end in an amazing revelation of heaven to earth. Whitehall confidently announced that as soon as Birmingham was sufficiently purified, by his processes, and brought back to such holiness, and sobriety, and chastity of life, as to deserve glory so great, the Lamb of God would grant an open manifestation of his presence, and commence his reign of a thousand years, as King of the World, in that honoured town!

Hitherto Sisypheus, though devoured by chagrin and envy, and working darkly at organising the resistance of his partisans to what he looked upon as an usurpation, had not ventured to assail the new order of things, except with gibes, and sneers, and vague mutterings of menace and discontent. But now, on a certain given day, shortly after the interview described with Grimsorwe, the bellows-blower presented himself in the usual assemblage of the people around their judge and spiritual instructor in the market-place, apparently in a much changed mood.

It may be thought that these daily religious meetings—for, after all, there was not much to be decided upon in material interests—spread an extraordinary spirit of enthusiasm and controversy among all orders of the townsfolk of Birmingham. From being a mere place of bargaining and chaffering, the whole area before the Church of St. Martin's had of latter times changed into a species of open-air debating club, where the strangest and wildest opinions, both in religion and politics, were expounded and ventilated, and all manner of visionary notions and delusions canvassed and argued with a zeal that occasionally bordered upon frenzy.

When, however, it is considered that the president and great oracle of these debates was himself *in secret a madman*, though one endowed with extraordinary powers of language and eloquence, it is not wonderful that the state of the public mind in Birmingham was becoming strangely disordered and heated, and the elements of a volcanic outbreak fast collecting.

It was not, therefore, deemed surprising or suspicious when Sisypheus, the Anabaptist, made his way through numbers of people, frothing at the mouth, with vehement argument on the question of the day—namely, what were the signs that must precede the *Visible Manifestation*—presented himself before the judgment-seat of Whitehall, his former rival candidate, and announced that he had received a revelation, directing him to submit himself and his brethren of the Black Chapel as a militia, or soldiery, to the absolute orders of the holy and inspired minister of Birmingham.

This judgment-seat was established at the Bull-Ring, and consisted of an elevated chair for the Angel, as Whitehall was now styled, and a row of benches for his subordinate elders.

Agreeably to certain passages in Revelations, prescribing that the Company of the Elect, who are to herald the Great Approach, should be 'clothed in white, with crowns of gold upon their heads,' Whitehall and his elders were all arrayed in long linen robes, though they were obliged to supply the precious metal for the decoration of their heads by coronals of brass lacquer; but the splendid polish communicated by Birmingham skill left little to be desired, except in the actual value of the ornament. In addition, Kingdom-Come rejoiced in a species of sceptre, though it was simply a long rod of iron, in accordance with the text, 'And he shall rule them with a rod of iron.'

Strange to say, among these singularly travestied personages sat Zachariah Firebrace, the Armourer!

The influence of the fanatic age had always been strong upon the Armourer's brooding and melancholy temperament. But of late his exasperation against the Holte family—feelings of disappointment in his most cherished plans, and dread of worse—had thrown Firebrace altogether into the party most opposed to any revival of cavalier influence in Birmingham. The frenzied zeal and eloquence of the new enthusiastic ruler found in him, moreover, a mind well prepared for those seeds of fire that sparkled from the mad but eloquent lips. Accordingly, he sat nearest the right hand of the Angel, and was graced with the title of Chief Apostle.

It was before this august array that Sisyphus presented himself.

The Anabaptist's followers, though not numerous, were believed to be of great determination and ferocity in their principles. Their flight from Tubal's cannon and menaces had, perhaps, a little shaken this opinion. But still their maimed leader could point as he spoke to the sturdy apparition of Faithful Moggs, gaping at him for commands, at the head of a chosen cohort of gloomy-looking men, armed with cudgels and pikes.

His own submission was dramatically sudden and surprising, and doubtless flattering to the vanity and secret fancies of the exalted visionary to whom it was made. Firebrace himself, the Angel's principal adviser in the actual business of ruling the town, desired by all means to strengthen the parties opposed to a Royalist reconciliation, and the unblushing bellows-blower applied his blasphemous invention most dexterously to impress the reality of the 'call' he pretended to have received to his present act of submission, on his hearers.

For three nights and three days, he stated, he had been tormented by a Voice incessantly repeating to him the words, 'They who are not with me are against me!' which he interpreted to mean that Minister Whitehall was truly chosen by the Lord, as well as the people, to do His will in Birmingham, and that it was the duty of all men, but specially all religious men, laying aside envy and pride, to devote themselves to aid him humbly in the work.

The result of a consultation between the Angel and his council, accordingly, was an acceptance of the services offered by the bellows-blower, whenever they should be needed, against the enemies of salvation and of the town of Birmingham—a decision which Whitehall propounded with the addition that the young man Tubal, who had been raised, even

as Saul, the son of Kish, to the service of the Lord, having visibly faltered in it, and received a severe disabling judgment on the same, he was truly of opinion that this new succour and support of armed men was granted by Heaven to supply the temporary loss. And on Sisyphus's further zealous demand, he conferred upon him and his Anabaptists the title of the *GUARD OF THE AMEN!*—an expression that seemed to possess some mystic and extraordinary meaning, both with him who asked and him who granted the designation.

Immediately this decree was uttered, Sisyphus burst, as it were, into an irresistible torrent of thanksgiving, and ordered his men to take up a position at once around the judgment-seat—a proceeding that rather startled and annoyed Firebrace, but gave apparently the highest satisfaction to Kingdom-Come. The frenzied eyes of the latter glared up with the peculiar light of madness, and the smile and nod of assent he gave to Sisyphus testified how the terrific delusion under which he laboured persuaded him that all was well, and the whole proceeding the result of an inspired recognition on the part of the bellows-blower of his own true nature and predestined exaltation.

Hardly was this arrangement effected, when an aged woman hobbled through the crowd to the judgment-seat—a crowd which nevertheless yielded and gave way in all directions to her approach, as soon as she was discerned to be the ill-famed Maud Grimsorwe, more generally known as the Witch of Aston.

Much curiosity had been excited by the Anabaptist's unexpected demonstration. But a great deal more was stirred by the apparition of this lonesome and disaster-boding old woman, who was so seldom known to leave her solitudes for the haunts of men.

The strangely antiquated fashion of Maud Grimsorwe's garb, her wild and haggard looks, the fear-driven and bewildered aspect she at first presented, might have justified any amount of wonder. And, in fact, the hag approached the tribunal with as noisy a skirling and tumult around her as an owl startled from her hollow tree and scudding before the clamour and pursuit of the birds of day, blinded herself with the light.

Sisyphus exercised his new duties for the first time by interfering to prevent the flooding of the mob quite up to the seats of the Angel and his elders, and also to protect Maud in her efforts to reach them without further interference.

The Witch of Aston accomplished this, and then, breathless with age, fear, and a consciousness of the atrocious wickedness thrust upon her execution, shrieked and sobbed for some time in a frantically hysterical manner before she could at last be induced to state her business there in some intelligible form.

The miserable old wretch had, however, been thoroughly persuaded by her still more detestable grandson that what she was about to do was the only means to preserve from an unborn intruder the so long-coveted Holte inheritance—to give him a final chance to oust his hated brother, and, above all, to preserve herself from the tremendous penalties of witchcraft. Sir Thomas, Grimsorwe informed her, was resolved upon subjecting her to them; and if she refused compliance with his own

wishes, he himself must remain powerless to aid her, and would withdraw at once from the spectacle of the triumph and happiness of his and her enemies.

Only the cruelty and subtlety of a man and a lawyer could, however, have suggested the dreadful calumnies and falsehoods the unhappy old woman now proceeded to utter.

She declared, in the first place, that she was currently but most causelessly reported to be a witch, and to deal in charms and incantations, to bring about various unlawful and forbidden results in the way of making people in love with each other, avenging them on their enemies, and effecting divers mischief to life and limb, cattle and corn; raising tempests, and pining folks with sickness in the bones.

All this was of false report, and she was entirely guiltless of the same. And still more of the vile practices imputed to her, in relieving women likely to become mothers, and who had the wickedness to desire it, unnaturally of their burdens, and at the cost of the destruction of the unborn, but not the less murdered, innocents, offspring of lust and shame!

How she had acquired so evil a reputation, Maud avouched, she knew not, except from the scandal of prating tongues, and some small skill she possessed and had exhibited in herbs and medicines.

Nevertheless, as they of Birmingham must be aware, she had fallen under the imputation, which, to her great sorrow, had forced upon her many revelations of the wickedness of the times, and of certain women of the town of Birmingham, who, in the desperation of their shame, scrupled not to offer her great recompenses to destroy its evidences.

Nay, the cases were not few, or confined to young creatures, whose poverty and dread of exposure was sharpened by inability to maintain the hapless fruit of guilt! And the horrible hag proceeded to declare that, after forbearing long to reveal the wickedness prevalent in that town of Birmingham, and dismissing her applicants with rebukes and threats that prevented their return, she had at last lost all patience at the suspicions and dangers accumulating against her on account of the numerous visits she received of the kind. And hearing that there was an angel of wisdom and holiness recently raised to authority in the town, she had come before him to declare her own guiltlessness, and denounce the villainous purposes against the laws of God and nature entertained even by women of a principal rank and station among them! Specially, and by name, a certain Mistress Dorothy Firebrace, daughter of a chief armourer of the town, who, being with child by Tubal Bromycham, her betrothed, and he having refused to perform his promise of marriage, in consequence of detecting her in an intrigue with Master Edward Holte, of Aston Hall, thereupon had applied to her for the means to remove the proof of her infamy, that so she might persuade one or other of her lovers to believe her innocent, and marry her still!

This vile accusation was expressed in far plainer language than the decency—not by any means the innocence—of our times permits to be repeated. But to declare the wonder, the fear, the horror, the indignation of Firebrace at the amazing statement would exceed the powers of language, however freely given in its full force and swing.

Of course, the father's first emotions were of utter incredulity, mingled with overboiling fury and rage at so shameful and public an accusation of his child.

He arose and yelled forth a denial of the charge, with passionate demands for immediate justice on the felonious witch-hag who had dared to defame an honest man's daughter, and chief armourer of Birmingham.

But the aged perjurer persisted in her statement, stimulated to greater virulence doubtless by the terms of opprobrium, and demands for vengeance, lavished on her by the unhappy sire. She challenged the proof. Let them only place the woman accused in proper custody, and under watch for a short time, and they would be furnished with every reasonable ground for conviction of the truth of her accusation, prevent the commission of a great crime, and the triumph of a wicked project on either of two men, honest and honourable, but for their unhappy connection with so worthless a creature, an infanticide in purpose, if not in deed!

The confusion and uproar that ensued upon all this made the very stones of the market-place of Birmingham vibrate. But, to crown the whole calamitous occurrence, the noise and discussion were at their very height when Dorothy Firebrace herself appeared in the midst of the surging populace, quietly making her way to the Angel's seat of judgment.

Quite unconscious that she herself could be concerned in the terrific demonstration, but alarmed for her father, whom she perceived speaking, with the foam tossing from his mouth with excitement, and furiously gesticulating, Dorothy pressed through the excited throng, with some difficulty, until she reached him.

'What is the matter, father? Why have you sent for me?' she said, with her characteristic self-possession and dignity. Indeed, the new relations of life into which she had entered, if they had rather sobered the sparkle and petulance of Dorothy Firebrace's vivacity, had added something of matronly majesty to her naturally proud and courageous demeanour.

But even her courage failed—even her heroic heart lost power and almost life, when the exasperated and affrighted hag turned fiercely upon her, and exclaiming, 'This is the woman that tempted me to abet in child-murder!' shrieked forth a repetition of her accusations.

Dorothy Firebrace stood paralysed with horror and surprise.

She perceived at once how difficult, how impossible, it would be to refute the degrading and terrible suspicions raised against her unless by the violation of her promises to Edward Holte, by a revelation which would expose him to all his father's wrath and malediction, before he had acquired any means of shelter for himself or her in the storm certain to arise.

She had the means in her power, it is true—of which she satisfied herself at the very moment by a convulsive clutch at her bosom, where her marriage certificate was deposited, sewn into the silk of her corset.

But at what destruction to her beloved husband, who had sacrificed so much for her! And evidently on the instigation of his fratricidal enemy;

for was not the Witch of Aston Richard Grimsorwe's grandmother and fellow-conspirator to deprive him of his birthright? Poor old Mr. Lane, too, the Coopers, all her faithful friends, at the same time to be given over to persecution and ruin!

Moreover, Dorothy considered to herself that she had defence enough in the infamous character of her accuser, and was not aware of the certainty Maud possessed of confirmation existing to her atrocious version of the reality.

As soon, therefore, as she could find speech to answer, Dorothy limited herself to indignantly denying the whole horrible calumny, and retorting upon her denouncer as a notorious witch, an agent and ally of the devil.

Unhappily Dorothy in her passion of self-defence, by this denunciation, disclosed that she had herself seen the witch in conference with her imp, in the shape of a cat, in her hut. And it was in vain for her afterwards to mention that this was several months previously, and that she had never had any kind of private speech with her of any sort. The grandmother of Richard Grimsorwe, worthy of the relationship, dexterously seized upon the statement at once as an admission of Dorothy's alleged visit and criminal request; and the clamours of the auditory on all sides showed they considered it a strong support to the hag's accusations.

It has been seen that Dorothy Firebrace was in no great favour with her townfolk; partly from her somewhat haughty manners, her sharp, sarcastic wit, and, with the female portion of the community, her supremacy of beauty. Moreover, the Birminghamers believed her to have taken hearty part against them with their cavalier enemies. All these circumstances united to render her humiliation and disgrace satisfactory to a considerable number in the assemblage, while it disposed a majority to lend, at all events, attention and credulity to what was said with those tendencies.

Still more unfortunately, the pride and disdain of the high-hearted girl's temperament suddenly returned upon her, in her conviction of the injustice and senselessness of the popular emotion. She turned on the noisy rabble, thronging around and yelling and hooting at her, and with indignant scorn declared she would not attempt any refutation of calumnies so odious, before such a tribunal of howling wolves, and made a movement as if to leave the market-place. But on a sudden the hideous hook of Sisypheus grappled her shoulder.

'Master!' he said, turning to Whitehall, who was staring bewilderedly on, 'must it not be, in mere justice, as the ancient woman hath demanded? Must not this accused girl be retained in captivity, even as the accuser has demanded, until the truth or falsehood of her charge can be essayed?'

'Let her remain in my custody, then!' shouted Firebrace, evidently almost frantic with excitement. 'I sent not for her here, though she says so; but, as my soul lives, I, her father, will surrender her to be stoned to death by the people, if it shall appear she is guilty in the sort denounced against her by this lying paramour-hag of the fiend.'

'A likely case!' the bellows-blower retorted insolently on his former

master. 'You want only the opportunity, Master Firebrace, to set her free for her Cavalier lover's entertainment, on his return with the King's ravagers, or to secure her time and opportunity still to perform the devilry we have all heard affirmed, murders already in her intent. No, Rabbi, or rather King Kingdom-come Whitehall! Let her be safely lodged at the Black Chapel, and guarded by us, your faithful and sworn servants of the right, until such time as a discreet and wise company of the matrons of the town may declare her guilt or innocence, to all men's knowledge and satisfaction.'

'The Black Chapel! Oh, thou villain! But, sirs, ye will not trust the fair woman in the power of my traitor husband, whose multiplied sins of adultery ought to make the earth open to swallow him. I know he seeks but to have her in his clutches to work some ruffian villany to her harm,' yelled Cut-throat Meg at this moment, battling her way through the mob as if with the purpose of setting her long nails in her crafty consort's visage.

Hitherto she had yelled against Dorothy.

There was a singular murmur, nevertheless, upon the words. The bellows-blower's real character was not unknown among the dregs of the populace associating with him in his recreations. But he himself turned with fury upon her, and shouting, 'Thou liest, torment of my existence,' would have struck her with his iron claw if Faithful Moggs had not interposed. 'Nay, good Sissy, 'tis a woman still,' he said, 'and look ye now, what is it the Teacher is about to say?'

Whitehall had continued, during this latter discussion, gazing with a strange fixity at Dorothy Firebrace. Those who were nearest him heard him mutter repeatedly, 'AND I WILL GIVE TO HIM THE MORNING STAR!—the Morning Star! the Morning Star!—what is your name, maiden, if wrongfully accused, as you avouch?'

'Dorothy'—she dared not add—Holte; she would not—Firebrace!

'Dorothy!—it is even so, then; the very name so prophesies it!' exclaimed the Angel, rising with an air of insane inspiration; 'Dorothy!—*Dorothea*—in its original Greek—signifieth truly, Divine Gift! It is even so, it is even so, unless the devil, by some artful gloss, commends a cup of impurity to our lips! It shall be known and declared as soon as may be! *Dorothea*. I will myself take the charge and custody of you in my own house, until such time as a true judgment can be formed and declared on your estate, when either you shall shine forth as the Morning Star, on the right hand of—but the time has not yet come!—or be exposed for what you truly are, on the pillory, to all men's horror and detestation, from noonday unto the setting of the sun; when, for your sin of fornication, you shall be stoned to death, by the people, even as your own sire has pronounced!'

Anything seemed better to the defenceless wife of the absent Edward Holte than to be consigned to the keeping of such a vile and revengeful wretch as Sisyphus, the bellows-blower, whose licentiousness his own wife had openly denounced. She had great belief and confidence in the benevolence and goodwill of the new Minister of Birmingham, wherever his fanaticism was not engaged, and by no means suspected the dangerous phase to herself into which his internal delirium had passed. It

was better even for her, she thought, as regarded the preservation of her secret, to be placed in his than in the custody of her father. She could not well conceal the truth from him, and he would be sure to insist on its open declaration. Meanwhile time would certainly be gained to make Edward acquainted with her uncomfortable situation, and obtain his sanction for the necessary means of extrication.

The result of a brief meditation, therefore, induced Dorothy to stretch her hand cordially to Whitehall, and say, 'I place myself thankfully under your protection, father, from this unjust rabblement's abuse.'

'No, not father, not father! I am Omega—not Alpha—the completion, not the beginning! Can she be the true Morning Star, yet not know this?' murmured the dread lunatic to himself, rather than to those who yet overheard.

Nevertheless, he took the proffered hand, surveyed its blue-veined whiteness for some moments with profound attention, and said to Sisyphus with a commanding air, 'Take her to the Parsonage before me, and let certain wife-women be summoned to pronounce on the accusation of the Witch.'

The bellows-blower looked extremely disappointed. But his consort's fierce scowl was upon him, and there was that also in Kingdom-Come's manner that indicated he meant to be obeyed.

Firebrace alone attempted any further remonstrance. 'If the man Tubal confesses the seduction of this wretched girl, and consents to marry her, will not that suffice, Master?' he groaned.

'On the contrary,' returned the insane Puritan, with relentless energy, 'if he confesseth so, he shall share her punishment, were he ten times Tubal Saul, and son of mine own blood!'

Dorothy essayed a few words of consolation to her father; but what could she say to the purpose without compromising her adored husband?

She could only entreat him to patience for a little while, and assure him emphatically that all would be well, whatever ill he feared. And then turning from the spectacle of the old man's visibly overwhelming anguish and shame, with an intensity of almost mortal sorrow in her own heart, she disdainfully bade Sisyphus obey his orders, and escort her with his club-men to the minister's house.

There was a universal and singular silence as this manœuvre was effected. But as Dorothy disappeared under her villanous convoy, the people broke again into busy mutterings and discourse, and the assemblage prepared in general to disperse.

'Merciful Lord!' Firebrace internally ejaculated, 'is this the explanation of Tubal's sudden change of feeling towards her, and avoidance of the question of their marriage? I will go and learn, whether the truth slays me as with a sharp sword cleaving the heart, or no!'

He receded from the company in which he sat, on this resolve.

Maud Grimsorwe, who had remained awhile leaning on her stick, and watching him, groaned to herself, 'He feels the serpent's tooth, too, now, in his heart, of a child's disgrace! Yet, why should I rejoice? He never injured me!' And she was about also to hobble off on her return, when a voice hissed in her ear, 'Witch! hast thou any spell to bring back a

truant husband to a fond wife's love ! If so, I can pay thee well ; I have still some hidden gold, of a kind to suit a witch's touch, for it is steeped in the blood of a murdered man !

It was Sisyphus's wife who thus spoke.

Maud Grimsorwe paused, looked around, and recognising the whisperer, observed, in an extremely malicious and exasperated tone, ' I have already told thee, thrice, NO, unless thou resolvest to obey thy husband's will, and humbly to serve his vileness in all things evil ; when, if so, follow him now, and aid him in his wicked designs upon this hapless girl !'

' I aid him !' exclaimed the virago. ' I'll follow and tear his eyes out if he but dares to look upon her so !'

Whitehall, on his part, had risen from his judgment-seat. ' I will follow at once, he muttered, ' and show her the name written on the white stone, to see if there is still no understanding of the great mystery in her !'

He was about to follow up his idea in action, when a new application detained him.

' Master,' said at all lean man, wrapped in a cloak, with a hat slouched almost down to the end of his nose, ' I come to consult you for an oracle of the Lord. Lo, I serve in a pagan house, in the midst of all manner of sorceries and iniquities, as master-cook ; and now Belshazzar is coming to a feast therein, and I am bidden to exhaust my skill in banqueting him ! But my soul is sick with reprobation, and I now ask of you, who are exalted even above my Teacher, whom I came to consult, is it lawful for me to remain in the pagan house, and do as I am bidden, or no ?'

' Good friend,' replied Whitehall, not in the least surprised by so singular a demand, ' the Book of the Law is as open to thee as to me ; but since thou wilt have it so, I will search in it for thee.'

As he spoke, the ' Angel ' opened a massive Bible, which lay beside him for his judgments on the species of throne he usually occupied ; and the text he lighted upon proved, indeed, of singular aptness to the occasion.

' Thus sayeth the Law,' he declared, in lofty accents : ' How long halt ye between two opinions ? If the Lord be God, follow him ; but if Baal, then follow him.' (1 Kings, chap. xviii.)

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

HISTORICAL.

SHORTLY after these events in Birmingham, all Warwickshire resounded with intelligence of the approach of King Charles the First with a large and royally appointed army, on his way through the county, and march towards London ; whereby he thought to compel the Parliament army to throw itself in his way, from Northampton, and put the decision of the great contention to the arbitrament of battle.

The emotion caused by these tidings was speedily greatly heightened

by certain intelligence that it was the King's intention to pass through Birmingham on his route southward.

Whether this latter movement would be executed with the assent of the townspeople continued for an interval doubtful. They kept up their chains and barriers some time after it was known that the King had accepted Sir Thomas Holte's earnest loyal invitation, and would halt and lodge at Aston Hall until he was joined by a portion of his adherents from Yorkshire, who were on the march thence to join his standard, under the leadership of the Marquis of Newcastle. But it then appeared so manifestly impossible on the part of the town to offer any effectual resistance to such overwhelming forces as were now concentrated upon it, in the absence of all assistance from the Parliament, that the loyalist or timorous portion of the people prevailed to have it declared they continued at peace with their Sovereign, and, confiding in his protection, would open their barriers for the passage of his army.

John-the-Rogue and his son were particularly active in submission, and they were now in the supremacy in the town and its councils, owing chiefly to the fact that, on the receipt of some additional ill news which reached him, Tubal Bromycham's fever and delirium had returned, and his life was long considered in danger. Of course, in so disabled a condition, mentally and bodily, he could have no influence on the course of events. Armourer Firebrace, also, overwhelmed with private griefs, of a kind truly to absorb all the faculties of an average man, took no notice of anything that occurred out of the pale of his domestic miseries.

Oliver Cromwell's labours and intrigues in Birmingham, therefore, came to nought. It was resolved to remove his hastily-raised defences, and that a deputation, headed by John-the-Rogue, should wait upon the King immediately on his arrival at Aston Hall, and assure his Majesty of the loyal obedience of the town.

The Right Worshipful Knight-Baronet, Sir Thomas Holte, on his part, determined to show his sense of the high honour vouchsafed him, in a manner that should far outdo all his former displays of grandeur and profusion in the entertainment of a royal guest—should, in fact, justify his pretensions to a high rank of nobility, and possibly forward the notions to which he still clung, of an alliance with royalty itself.

On very slender grounds apparently, excepting that he heard from his son, who continued with the cavalry under Prince Rupert's command, that he was treated with marked kindness and friendship by his Highness—a conduct much in contrast to his former demonstrations, and for which Sir Thomas could only account to himself on the supposition that the Prince still cherished an attachment for his daughter.

But with regard to Arabella herself, in spite of all the extreme but judicious severity he imagined he exercised, it could scarcely be thought Sir Thomas was proving a very successful manager; for although the prime Royalist nobility and gentry of the entire county were expected to assemble at Aston Hall, to receive the King, including the ladies of Hagley, it did not appear that Sir Thomas intended to release his daughter from the extraordinary species of close and solitary imprisonment to which he had consigned her.

So Richard Grimsorwe ascertained on the very morning of the day

when the King was expected, with the vanguard of his army, chiefly of cavalry. Sir Thomas and the distinguished gathering alluded to were to proceed on horseback to the borders of the county of Warwickshire, at Sutton Coldfield, to escort his Majesty, with due honours, to Aston Hall.

The entire extensive residence was thronged with guests and their attendants. The entire household of Aston Hall, powerfully reinforced, was in one universal bustle of preparation. But the superb beauty, whose presence would have been one of the greatest embellishments of the intended displays, nowhere appeared.

Grimsorwe ventured to make the observation, in some such palavering form, to Sir Thomas, watching his opportunity to encounter him as he returned from a last visit to his terrified and nerve-shaken consort, upon whom he had been heaping commands for her enforcement during his absence in the cavalcade to Sutton.

The question was evidently not agreeable, from the fierce and irritated tone of the reply.

‘Would you have me let a *madwoman* loose among the guests, and to the very presence of the King? And the girl persists, the only notice she will take of the Prince, who has honoured her with so much undeserved favour, will be to reiterate all she said at your witch-grandmother’s hovel, Richard! And all she asks of me, in the midst of her own straw and chains, and narrow, grave-like lodgment in the Dark Chamber, is to know whether Tubal Bromycham was spared and lives! I shall be obliged, I fear, to conceal her obstinate infatuation, by pretending that I have sent her away in dread of our ill-neighbouring at Aston awhile.’

‘But, my dear father,’ began Grimsorwe, when Sir Thomas pettishly interrupted him.

‘Look that you call me none such in the presence of the King, Dickon!’ he exclaimed. ‘We all know how straitlaced his Majesty is in matters of morality; and neither must you, nor can you, take upon yourself my sonship without betrayal of the facts, being Edward’s elder, yet he the inheritor. Nor see I why I should be made to blush before my prudish King, to own you as the bastard-born you are, of such a mother’s race!’

This was hard to swallow, but Grimsorwe made no retch at it. He had a revenge in store that sweetened all the intermediate gulps of bitterness.

‘I shall claim neither father nor brotherhood, sir, without both your good allowances,’ he replied. ‘If you present me at all to his Majesty’s benevolent notice, it needs only be as one of your servants that aided in warning him of his danger at Nottingham to the best of a poor ability. But I know not, Sir Thomas, why you should deem it so desperate to bring my sister—Miss Holte, I would say—to some reasonableness, especially after what I have this day heard.’

‘What have you heard this day?’ said Sir Thomas. He had a great respect for his crafty son’s intelligence, in all mischievous respects.

‘I have heard that on this very day—being Sunday—but the better day the better deed—as you yourself seem to think, sir, since you have

ordered a bull-baiting in Birmingham, to celebrate his Majesty's arrival, and the hearty submission of the good people there—the Angel of Birmingham, as he calls himself, and his favourite followers, have decreed to set a woman creature on the pillory, who is convicted of incontinence with this same blacksmith lover of your daughter—for whose sake she refused the addresses of a royal prince, and endures such grievous extremities, for one so delicately bred, at your unwilling hands !

‘How? What say you? Of all good pleasingness, say it again ! What woman is this?’ exclaimed Sir Thomas, with the most delighted interest.

‘Even that very wench in contention for whose good graces I had the worst part of my recent wrangle with your son, sir—whom I must not call my brother any more, to get out of the wont of it when the King's Majesty may hear !—even Dorothy Firebrace, the armourer's daughter ; an altogether worthless and most discreditable slut, who, although plighted in marriage, and anticipating its lawful satisfactions with Tubal, her betrothed, has been detected by him in her intrigue with Edward (I blame him not ; the chance was as well-nigh mine), and cast off by him to the rigour of the Birmingham Puritans. Nor is that all the worst of it !’

And the infamous calumniator proceeded to repeat his grandmother's perjuries, instigated by himself, respecting Dorothy's pretended criminal projects to preserve herself from the consequence of her misdemeanour.

From Grimsorwe's now more precise statements to Sir Thomas, it appeared that, faithful to her word through every extremity, the wife of Edward Holte was in reality in danger of being exposed to the scorn and resentment of the populace of Birmingham, in the most disgraceful form of punishment, on the infamous charges of which she was entirely innocent. Nay, there was even reason to expect that, according to the extraordinary rules of discipline put in force by the fanatic party in the town, her life might probably be sacrificed.

Minister Whitehall had solemnly adjudged her guilty, and condemned her to death. Her father himself, Grimsorwe stated, had abandoned all hope or intention of succouring her, on its being ascertained that she was in reality likely at no distant period to become a mother ; while, equally disgusted with her infamy and infidelity, Tubal Bromycham *feigned* to continue too ill to leave his couch or make any effort on her behalf.

Sir Thomas Holte was most extraordinarily delighted with these tidings of what was represented to him as the full exposure of the villainess of a woman whom he himself had long regarded, in vague but formidable lights, as a hindrance to a portion of his own most favourite projects, though he had no suspicion as yet how completely so. Full information on this point was reserved for a most decisive and overwhelming revelation.

On the contrary, Grimsorwe affected to speak of the whole disastrous affair with regret, in consequence of his aged grandmother having been compelled, in her own vindication, to figure in so unpleasant an affair, and which was certain to bring so much needlessly additional ill-will upon her.

The only satisfaction he admitted himself to derive from it all was

that his brother (he called him so again) would now be convinced of the truly infamous character and conduct of the woman, for whose sake chiefly he had quarrelled with Grimsorwe himself; not knowing how justified the boldness of his attempts had been by the bad repute of the girl, and the impudent encouragement she had extended to him on their very first encounter in Aston Park, until she learned whose relation he was, and the likelihood of exposure in consequence.

The deceived old man, wickedly and cruelly rejoicing in the whole grievous revelation, hastened, as Grimsorwe had expected he would, at once with it to the truly barbarous and unjustifiable confinement in which he had placed his unfortunate daughter—under the unfounded and tyrannous pretence that she required restraining as a madwoman.

To this day the Dark Chamber at Aston Hall, situated high in its roof, near the central dome, and worthy of its name from its being absolutely lightless and windowless, retains the sad tradition of Arabella Holte's inhuman seclusion there.

It may be seen by any explorer who ventures up a final steep, ladder-like flight of stairs, and stoops to enter a black and noisome cell, formed by a slope of a portion of the roofing of Aston Hall. Such a cell, indeed, as even the most unfortunate real victims of insanity in that age were but rarely consigned to, and alone of itself capable of injuring the mental faculties of a human being given over to its gloom and solitude—not to mention the physical miseries and inconvenience of an abode in a chamber scarcely high enough to allow a child of twelve years to stand upright in any part.

In spite, however, of all the astounding information to Tubal Bromycham's disadvantage Sir Thomas had it now in his power to divulge, and his commands to the captive to leave her dungeon and shine forth once more to recall a royal lover to her feet, he descended in a still more exasperated mood than he had mounted. And he informed the expectant Grimsorwe, that 'the madwoman' only persisted more obstinately than ever in her trust in the blacksmith's fidelity, and declared she would only believe her own senses to the contrary. 'As if,' said Sir Thomas, 'I would trust her in Birmingham, in the midst of its rabblement, to see the wench in her pillory.'

'There is consolation, however,' said Grimsorwe, 'in the certainty that on receipt of the intelligence we can communicate concerning his paramour, my brother Edward will be no longer unwilling to complete his marriage with the Lord Keeper's heiress! and as she will be opportunely at the Hall here, I would advise no further delay to be made in it. 'Tis scarcely possible to conceive how far his infatuation for the Birmingham wench may else carry him.'

'It shall be so,' said Sir Thomas, grimly. 'My Lord Keeper will be with the King, and will propose it to him at once, for the sake of the heirship of my lands and name, as well as his, before these wars fairly begin. I shall not be disappointed there at least. But now for some brief final conference with the master-cook, on his dainties to be prepared for the royal table, and then to horse with my noble company, and to Sutton away.'

Grimsorwe willingly summoned the master-cook to attend his father, and so expedite his departure.

Adam Blackjack came. Sir Thomas, who was great in such matters, reiterated to him a variety of injunctions and commands on the preparation of the magnificent banquet he had determined to give the King and his chief retinue on his arrival. Above all, he recommended the utmost punctuality to the hour at which he had ascertained it would please his Majesty to dine, and at which it would be practicable to have everything in readiness. But on this latter point Sir Thomas somewhat good-humouredly remarked he was satisfied his master-cook would not fail. He had never known him to do so, he said, and it was not likely he would do so in this instance; without concern he would wager his very life on Adam Blackjack's fidelity to arrangement.

During this harangue, Grimsorwe noted with curiosity the inexplicable smile that kept quivering over the countenance of the chief cook of Aston Hall, and the expression of stubborn will and resolve, rather than of obedience, with which he listened to his master's orders.

It was a purpose of his own, however, that induced Grimsorwe to detain Adam Blackjack after Sir Thomas had at last taken his departure.

A purpose which it seemed required extraordinary secrecy and privacy from the precautions he took, but which need not yet be elucidated. But it should be stated, Adam Blackjack listened with the same mysterious smile and gloomy inattention he had bestowed on Sir Thomas Holte's directions. And having heard all that it was wished he should hear, replied that he would rather Master Grimsorwe should bring the papers he wished him to sign after the banquet was served, as his fingers trembled so with anxiety at the time that he thought he could hardly write legibly.

'At best, I am a poor scholar, Master Grimsorwe,' he said, with a strange laugh; 'and in signing one's soul over to the devil, one should be particular to be plainly legible! Howbeit, you offer me a fair price for the merchandise! And though your grandmother, the witch, cursed me this very morn for exhorting her to turn from her damnable ways, and take example from what she should see and hear of me henceforth, I freely forgive her, and own that five hundred pounds, secured on your inheritance of Aston Hall, is an ample recompense for scrawling my name to an old yellow marriage certificate—where you are right to say it ought to have been placed thirty years ago!'

CHAPTER LXXXV.

KING CHARLES THE FIRST AT ASTON HALL.

NEVER since Aston Hall was a structure had so bustling a day fallen to the lot of its inmates as this of the expected arrival of King Charles the First within its walls.

All was hurry, and bustle, and confusion. Servants rushed about, overthrowing one another and what they carried, in their extreme dili-

gence. Important guests arrived from all quarters, scarcely noticed. The deputation of the townsfolk of Birmingham, headed by John-the-Rogue and the Chief Bailiff Cooper, were literally not asked into the house, but quietly submitted to the indignity of awaiting his Majesty's arrival in the open space before it. True, it was not numerous, everybody excusing himself that by any means could. Perhaps even Cooper would not have cared to present himself, had not his wife insisted he should; and to enforce her decrees, and prompt his utterances, accompanied him in person—the only lady of the town who was of the party. But Dame Cooper had another motive for this, besides the necessity of showing her duty to the Sovereign, and that she and her husband were no participants in the disloyal doings of Birmingham.

Richard Grimsorwe was perhaps the only inhabitant of Aston Hall, with the exception of the unhappy imprisoned young lady of it, who took no concern in the general movement. He remained secluded in his own chamber the whole morning, engaged in a somewhat lawyer-like occupation, which, however, suspiciously resembled that of a *forgery*!—imitating from certain old documents before him another handwriting, on scraps of tobacco-steeped parchment, that seemed prepared for the purpose of also looking old.

It was long before Grimsorwe succeeded in this object completely to his satisfaction. He then most dexterously transferred a seal from one of the old documents to the new imitation—and proceeded to make a deliberate and careful toilette.

Time had, however, passed unconsciously during the absorbing task he had been engaged in, and Grimsorwe was startled into haste by hearing the bells of Aston Church ring out a merry peal of welcome for the expected great arrival. He managed, nevertheless, to get down to the hall front in time to witness it; which it was an object of some importance for him to effect, that he might draw conclusions as to the position of persons and events. He took good care to carry the documents, so laboriously prepared, secreted in the breast of his doublet.

He found Lady Holte in the hall, with a number of other ladies, visitors, of the chief families of the county, whose husbands and sons formed part of the cavalcade gone to meet the King. Two facts struck Grimsorwe then at once. Neither the Lord Keeper Lyttelton's wife nor his daughter, Edward Holte's betrothed, was present; and that the eyes of the unhappy lady were red as if with weeping—magnificently arrayed in her quality of hostess of Aston Hall though she was—doubtless, for her daughter's sake, whose prison-door she had probably visited during the tyrannical father's absence. She could not enter it, Sir Thomas having conveyed away with him the key of the strong lock.

Meanwhile the esplanade before the mansion presented a sufficiently gay and crowded appearance, Sir Thomas's tenantry and the villagers of Aston being all assembled there in their Sunday smarts; not to mention the deputation from Birmingham, which stood huddled together, with humbled and even alarmed looks, along the garden-wall enclosure.

A discharge of musketry announced the entrance of the royal cavalcade into Aston Park; and very shortly afterwards the glittering

cuirasses and waving banners of Prince Rupert's cuirassiers appeared in sight.

In the midst of these Richard Grimsorwe speedily discerned his father and the royal commander named, riding side by side, in company with Count O'Taafe, and seemingly on the best possible terms with each other. Grimsorwe augured from this that his Highness persisted in his liking for Miss Holte, and had probably been renewing his proposals for an alliance to the ambitious sire of Arabella.

Arrived at the esplanade, Rupert's cuirassiers faced about, as did Sir Thomas and the Prince—the former, however, alighting to receive his Sovereign with a suitable mark of homage.

King Charles and his immediate retinue followed on this advance.

The King himself was in a plain dress of black velvet, with the broad blue ribbon of the Garter over his breast, and a wide-brimmed hat, with a plume of feathers waving from a brooch, or agraffe, of sparkling diamonds. He was mounted on a magnificent white charger, of the towering size and strength still familiar to modern eyes in the portraits of the monarch by Rubens.

His Majesty was surrounded by a brilliant retinue of noblemen and gentlemen, among whom figured his newly-appointed general-in-chief, a Scotchman, and veteran leader of the wars of Gustavus Adolphus, recently created Earl of Lindsay. Lord Falkland was among this retinue, wearing his characteristic expression of melancholy thoughtfulness greatly deepened, while, on the contrary, the King's gravity appeared much diminished, and he was talking cheerfully, and even laughing, with the flighty young Earl of Denbigh, who rode, as Master of the Horse, close by his side. But Grimsorwe's devouring envy and hatred left him only eyes for the fact that Edward Holte rode at the other bridle, seemingly in great favour and notice with Charles, who had honoured his entertainers at Aston Hall so far as to command that the guard on his visit there should be the troop commanded by its loyal young heir.

Yet Grimsorwe could easily discern that, in spite of these marks of distinction Edward looked singularly absent and brooding in mind; not sufficiently so, however, the unnatural brother thought, to have learned the disastrous news of Birmingham. Probably he was only surprised and disquieted at receiving no intelligence from his wife from the town of late, ample precautions having been taken to prevent all communication between Dorothy and her friends, of every kind and degree, since she had been immured a captive at the Parsonage, and guarded by the myrmidons of Sisyphus, the bellows-blower. Edward's appointment to attend the King personally would equally likely have prevented explanations between the father and son, not to mention that Grimsorwe had strongly recommended Sir Thomas not to let fall any intelligence on the subject till the day was over, and the 'vile wench's' disgrace and punishment (so the villain called her) assured.

In this manner escorted, King Charles the First arrived at Aston Hall, amidst the joyful shouts of the loyalist rustics, timidly echoed by the Birmingham deputation, who seemed afraid even to give offence by proffering homage; the beating of drums, the blasts of trumpets, the clamour of the village joy-bells, and a renewed discharge of musketry.

The King seemed to take little notice of the demonstration until he reached Sir Thomas's standing-place. He then slightly raised his plumed hat, and bowed once or twice to the shouting throngs, but with a coldness and severity of manner that rather resembled repulse than acceptance, and strangely quelled the effusion.

Sir Thomas bade his Sovereign welcome to his 'poor house of Aston' in a somewhat too long and elaborate speech; but to which Charles, a great stickler for form, listened with unruffled patience, if not attention, and Sir Thomas was further delighted at the conclusion of his harangue by the monarch's emphatic observation—'Good wine needs no bush, Sir Thomas Holte, and, despite your humble phrasing of its merits, your fine new house praises itself to any judging eye. I am right glad to see such a taste for noble architecture, and handsome appointments of all sorts to life, arising among my nobility and gentry, now that the old castle day is so well-nigh over. But, indeed, those served to little other purpose than as hiding-holes and fortresses of rebellion, to which palaces like these, open on all sides to the honest sunshine, cannot easily be turned. I see my nephew is in the right in his reports of the beauty and stateliness of Aston Hall, and that it would make a fair mansion to lodge an *Earl*—the which your own and your son's services will, I trust, enforce upon us to present to this neighbourhood. For certain, the air is very bright and fresh hereabout, and it was a wise carpenter who said to you, Build here. It has given me a joyful and eager appetite for my dinner, and I hope your cook is one who studies his hours punctually, and that we may depend on exactness to the noonday for our meal. There is a Spanish proverb, "A good stomach should be fed when 'tis a dog, not when 'tis a wolf!"'

'I'll wager on my cook to a half-minute quartered, sire, if he hath no other merit! Will it please you now to alight, and enter the house, which is more my King's than mine henceforth?' Sir Thomas replied, reverently placing himself on one knee, and taking the royal stirrup to assist in the process indicated. Nor was this humility considered in those days an unfitting degradation on the part of a well-born host to his Prince.

Edward Holte had meanwhile taken the King's bridle, with a deep bend, almost to his own stirrup, as he did so, and Charles alighted rather heavily as if tired of his long ride. All the noblemen and gentlemen in the retinue immediately did the same, baring their heads to the royal glance.

Slightly acknowledging the homage, Charles courteously requested his host to rise and be his escort into the house; where, after some refreshments in a private chamber, he said he should be very willing to receive the dutious homage and respects of Sir Thomas Holte's friends and neighbours of the county of Warwick, agreeable to his request, who had assembled to assure his Majesty of their devotion to his person and cause.

'But we will be brief as may be in the ceremony, Sir Thomas; for as I have told you, I have a hunter's appetite for my dinner, so that they who can remember my father's onsets at Theobald's after a day's stag-hunt, will think his jovial time come back again!' said Charles, good-

humouredly ; and placing his hand, in its embroidered gauntlet glove, affably on the baronet's tall shoulder, he added, ' Let us lose no further time here, at all events. Lead on, Sir Thomas, and let me make the acquaintance of my Lady Countess of Birmingham, that is to be ; and of your fair daughter, of whom such fine reports have reached us that we have a curiosity as to contemplate one of nature's masterpieces, in her beauty and grace.'

Charles nevertheless pronounced the latter complimentary words with a slight frown and rather disturbed and inquiring glance at Prince Rupert, who coloured deeply, and, to careful observation, glanced with angry suspicion at Count O'Taaffe. The last pretended to look quite unconscious of the meaning flashed at him.

Sir Thomas himself was considerably embarrassed in his reply, though probably arranged before in his mind. ' I trust and fully believe my daughter will be able to present herself to your Majesty's most gracious notice during some portion of your sojourn here. But I left her in the morning sick in her chamber of some womanish ailment, which the mere mention of your royal wish to see her will cure.'

' Perchance not so. Women's complaints are sometimes obstinate, and we must let no grass grow under White Buckingham's hoofs between here and London, Sir Thomas,' the King replied, seemingly not dissatisfied with the excuse. ' But who are these fellows craning their necks so eagerly towards us, as if they meant to pickaxe up the ground with their noses on our way ?'

' They are fellows, sir,' replied the vindictive baronet, ' who should have ropes at full stretch round those same stiff necks of theirs—being a deputation from seditious Birmingham, sent to tell you that finding they cannot help themselves otherwise, they have opened the town to the passage of your troops, after doing all that treason and traitors could to your Majesty's disparagement and harm.'

Charles knit his brows.

' I have heard much of the misdoings of the Birminghamers in these respects, Sir Thomas,' he answered drily. ' But how is it your son speaks up rather for them, and with so much earnestness that he has won from me a promise of pardon and remission of all offence offered by the rebellious town ? And *at present*,' he added, with marked significance on the words, ' it behoves us to show ourselves a king of our word. A time may come for these as well as all other traitors and traitor-abettors in our realms. But I must speak them fair awhile ; hearken, Falkland, if I have not caught some touch of those silvery notes of yours of peace.'

So saying, the King, in a most gracious and seemingly free and willing manner, stepped forward towards the quivering and shrinking Birminghamers, who immediately cast themselves most reverently on their knees before him. And John-the-Rogue, as chief of the deputation, was about to make some striking commencement of a speech, when Charles courteously interrupted him.

' There is no need to profess your duties, sirs,' he said, very affably ; ' your presence and humility sufficiently guarantee them, and we can well believe what your town has done amiss was at the instigation and

by the madness of a few. But we have no leisure now to make inquiries, and separate the black sheep from the white, or even the piebald. This in general only. You may confirm to your town all our assurances of favour and protection, while it continues to show itself so worthy of both ; insomuch that we declare, and bid all who hear us note the fact, we will punish with death any soldier, or even any officer of our army, who shall dare to offer the slightest injury or insult in Birmingham, while we abide hereabouts, or pass onward through it.'

The deputation burst into a complete cackle of thanksgiving ejaculations ; during which Charles bowed, and with a smile full of gracious insincerity, withdrew, and resumed his walk beside Sir Thomas Holte to the entrance of the mansion.

Edward was following in the crowding attendance that then also resumed its march, when, on a sudden, he felt his sleeve plucked. He looked round, and there stood Dame Cooper, looking as red as a peony with excitement and agitation. 'Oh, Master Edward ! Master Holte ! mercy on us all !' she exclaimed. 'My last hope in you and your soldiers and the King's goodness is gone ! Oh, that poor unhappy girl ! Oh, poor Dorothy Firebrace, all is lost for her and you and the unborn innocent, your child !'

Turning deadly pale, Edward demanded an explanation of these extraordinary ejaculations ; and the good dame, drawing the luckless husband of Dorothy Firebrace aside, overwhelmed him with the shocking revelations of her pressing and dreadful danger, and the apparent hopelessness of all redemption from it since the King had guaranteed so completely the town from any interference in its cruel and unlawful doings.

Meanwhile Charles proceeded to the entrance of Aston Hall, where a new and still more imposing ceremonial of reception awaited him on the part of the lady of the mansion and her female company. Nothing could be seen for some time on all sides but descending and puffing sagues of the richest stuffs, curtsying to the ground with their fair owners' homage ; fluttering fans and waving plumes.

Bestowing the great honour of a salute from the royal lips on Lady Holte, whom he greeted as his most kind and courteous hostess, Charles brought the tears in a full gush to the poor woman's eyes by declaring how grieved he was to hear of her daughter's indisposition. But luckily or unluckily, we scarce can say which, for the Holtes, Grimsorwe now thrust himself so prominently forward that the King's attention was removed from a somewhat suspicious consideration of his hostess's display of emotion towards the intruder.

'Who is this gentleman, Sir Thomas?' he inquired, with visible surprise and distaste. 'Or perhaps we ought rather to ask of my Lord Keeper, as he seems a graduate of the long robe.'

'May it please your Majesty, I am that *Elder Brother of Edward Holte* who had the happiness and honour to share his risks in the hint conveyed to you at Nottingham, which so nigh concerned the safety of your royal person,' Grimsorwe replied, with wonderful forwardness and audacity, and in obvious defiance of Sir Thomas's commands on the subject of their untoward relationship.

But he scarcely reaped the fruit he designed. Sir Thomas blushed scarlet, and looked fiercely and menacingly at him, while the King sternly and shortly remarked, 'I have heard a different account of that matter, Master Grimsorwe,' and passed him with a visible expression of disdain and resentment.

'Ha ! my sweet brother has been poisoning me with the King, also, in the honey-droppings of his lips, no doubt ; but he will find business of his own as well worth attention, by-and-by,' Grimsorwe internally ejaculated ; and after a moment's pause of reflection, boldly followed in the general movement accompanying the King.

Charles offered his arm to Lady Holte, who, trembling all over with nervous excitement, and hardly knowing what she answered to the monarch's gracious compliments on the well-ordering and stateliness of her husband's residence, guided him to the suite of chambers intended for his abode in Aston Hall, and which still bears his ill-starred royal name.

The fine proportions and gorgeous decorations of the apartments assigned to the King were indeed deserving of all commendation ; but Sir Thomas was too much exasperated with the recent occurrence to take that pleasure he otherwise might in his Sovereign's praises and thanks for the magnificent accommodation provided him. And he, too, was glad when, the duty of escorting the King thither in state being performed, he was at liberty to withdraw his attendance, and seek an opportunity to vent some portion of his angry feeling on the presumptuous and disobedient bastard.

'Come with me, Dick Grimsorwe,' he said, as he passed him, in no conciliatory tones ; 'I have a crow to pick with you, my lad. And you must not think I will suffer an unlawful brat like you to plague and beard me like my lady's heir.'

'Whither are we going, then, sir, for these explanations?' Grimsorwe replied, in gloomy but resolute accents.

'To the kitchens. The King is hungry, and I must see if Adam Blackjack has all in good readiness ; and I promise you, Master Grimsorwe, I mean to waste no more time than I need, on so busy a day, to rebuke your insolence,' Sir Thomas briefly replied ; and in truth he opened the side door which conducts from the hall of Aston Hall to the underground offices of the mansion.

Grimsorwe followed his vexed sire in, who closed the door instantly after them.

'And now, sir,' continued the baronet, pale with anger, 'tell me who you think you are, so audaciously to violate my orders to my teeth ?'

'What I said I am—Edward Holte's *elder brother* ; and if I had my true claims recognised, Sir Thomas Holte's only lawful son and heir.'

'Are you a madman ?' returned Sir Thomas, gazing at this novel pretendant with some actual suspicion that the case was even so.

'I am no madman,' Grimsorwe sternly replied ; 'I have discovered within these few hours the proofs of my lawful birth, and of your marriage with my mother, Sir Thomas Holte—consequently, the bastardy

of all others who bear your name by your pretended marriage with the lady you now call your wife. Your wicked agent and accomplice, Adam Blackjack, stung by remorse, has confessed all, and placed the marriage certificate of Maud Grim-sorwe and Sir Thomas Holte, Knight-baronet, duly witnessed, but surreptitiously removed from the parish books of Sutton Church, in my hands. And before the King leaves Aston Hall I will demand justice, and the restoration of my rights, and submit the proofs to his royal judgment and decision.'

'Mad, then, thou art, bastard-liar!' almost shouted Sir Thomas Holte. 'Or, rather, thou art even as black a villain as Prince Rupert declares you in the witchcraft affair, and my only objection is removed to the process necessary, he himself tells me, to remove the spell from Arabella. The witch herself must be compelled by torments and flames to undo her work, and your beldam granny shall lie in close custody within an hour.'

'I care not; I can easily show you have but done it to invalidate, as much as in you lies, her signature to the long-lost marriage lines, found in my murdered mother's bosom, and secreted by your villanous accomplice, Sir Thomas Holte. Come to him—hear if he will deny it! And let me tell you, Sir Thomas, you will find it more to your honour and renown to admit my claims than to cling to Edward Holte as your heir, of whom I have certain proof that he is *positively married* to the infamous mechanic woman of Birmingham, Armourer Firebrace's daughter—who is this day set in the pillory for incontinence with many others, and crimes projected more abhorrent still!'

'Married! My son Edward *married* to a mechanic of Birmingham's daughter!' exclaimed Sir Thomas, aghast at the words.

'Know you Edward's handwriting! And what says he here?' returned Grim-sorwe, producing the stolen document, of which Sisyphus the bellows-blower had possessed himself.

Sir Thomas Holte could not prevent himself from taking the paper, and running his dismayed glance over its contents.

'It is false! It is another piece of witchcraft! It is a forgery!' he yelled; maddening, nevertheless, with the conviction that what he saw and read was real.

'Ask Edward himself; he will not deny the fact, in hopes to induce you to take his seducers into compassion and relief from the dangers that encompass her!' sneered the fiendish grandson of Maud Grim-sorwe.

'I! May she perish in them, as she has so fully deserved! But, good heavens! all this is impossible; or it has been penned simply to quiet a clamorous woman's entreaties—meaning nothing, meaning nothing! It must—it shall be impossible! Great heaven! just when the Prince has made a formal demand for my daughter's hand, and hopes to win his royal uncle's consent to their union, if only she can be recovered from the delusion of a sorceress! But I will put the matter to the proof at once. My Lord Keeper and I have indeed already agreed upon it, who was so offended with Edward's backwardness that he avows it is by his order his lady and daughter are not at Aston Hall, and shall not come until Edward brings Miss Penelope himself from Hagley as his

bride. He shall go thither at once on the errand, or—or—what shall I do if all my children turn out such cancers in my flesh ?’

‘You will find I have spoken the truth, and less than the truth,’ Grimsorwe replied, with fierce composure. ‘Meanwhile, Sir Thomas Holte, I would advise you to compose your angry spirit, and consider wiselier to do myself, your true and eldest son, and my mother’s memory, the scant justice in your power now.’

‘Ha ! is it the madman, Adam Blackjack, say you, has put this frenzy in your head ?’ returned Sir Thomas, ragingly. ‘By the King’s life ! I will know the why and wherefore, and beat it out of his own narrow skull, if need be !—only that we have so much need of his skill to-day, and the King desires his dinner to be punctually served. But I will speak with the Anabaptist lunatic (so I know he has become) quietly, until I make him own his frenzy. Come with me, crazed witch’s grandson, and you shall see if Adam Blackjack dares maintain this false invention to my face.’

Grimsorwe was extremely undesirous this interview should take place before he had assured himself of Adam Blackjack’s signature to his forged certificate. But still more apprehensive of what might be revealed in a private interview between his father and the changeably-excited master-cook, he followed on Sir Thomas’s exasperated advance.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

MURDER.

RATHER to the surprise of both parties in this altercation, no steaming odours of the intended magnificent banquet came to their olfactories as they descended to the kitchen offices. Perhaps they did not notice the circumstance much in the absorption of their minds at first, but it could not be avoided when, opening the massive doors upon the immense cooking ranges of Aston Hall, everything appeared silent, cold, and desolate.

No great fires, no smoking roasts, no bubbling boils, no busy kitchen-men and kitchen-maids. All silent, cold, and desolate ! The only person, in fact, that appeared was Adam Blackjack himself, seated on one of the dressers, with crossed arms and closed eyes, muttering unintelligibly to himself, and with a Bible open widely on his knee.

Sir Thomas imagined himself under the influence of some delirious dream, and it was rather in the hope to rouse himself than the cook that he strode up to him, and shook him violently until he opened his eyes.

‘God o’ mercy, what is the meaning of all this, villain ? Where are the preparations for the King’s banquet—the game, the stews, the comfitures ? The stag roasted whole, the—the—where are all the kitchen-menials gone ? Why are you glaring thus at me ?’

‘Hands off, uncircumcised of heart and soul ! Hands off, Sir Thomas Holte ! Unbelieving Ahab ! touch me not, but receive the testimony unto the Lord, which, behold ! I have this day taken up against thee,

and thy wicked house, and Belshazzar the King, who comes to defile and shatter the sacred vessels and utensils of Israel, for his ungodly appetites,' the madman replied, springing down from his seat and violently shaking off his master's astonished grasp. 'Yea!' he continued, in a tone of frenzied excitement and exultation, 'I have this day cast off for ever the yoke of Babylon from about my neck, and I have received the oracle of the Lord, and done even as He hath bidden me by the mouth of His inspired servant and angel in Birmingham, Wrath-of-God Whitehall that was, but is now openly proclaimed Kingdom-Come! And I have sent all the men and maidens of my service, with all the viands gathered for the banquet—yea, all the fat oxen, the luscious venisons, the sleek muttuns, the hares, the fowls, the golden carp, the glittering trout, the rich pies, and confectioneries, and jellies—in carts into Birmingham town, pretending unto the witnesses that it was by your orders, and that the King's Majesty would dine with the townsfolk in their Guild. I have done my worst, humanly speaking, and now, Sir Thomas Holte, do yours!'

'Abominable madman!' roared out Sir Thomas, frantic with rage, and collaring the cook as if he meant to strangle him. 'And it is you also who pretend to witness that I was married to the daughter of a vile witch, and that Richard Grimsorwe is my first-born true and lawful inheritor!'

'No, unbeliever; no!' yelled the cook in return. 'I take up my testimony also against the witch and her devil offspring, and all their works, and I tell you the man Richard has been long conspiring the death of your son Edward; is in league with the Anabaptists of Birmingham; conspired the destruction of your King Belshazzar himself! At this very moment I witness, he has in his pocket a forged certificate of his mother's marriage, to which he wants me perjurally to affix my signature, having also forged that of the parish clerk of Sutton—dead Feldon's—to the lying document! Search him for it! But, as to me, I go this instant to the full presence of Belshazzar, and all his wicked nobles and servants, openly to denounce Richard Grimsorwe's treasons and malefactions and witch bastardy, and so complete the confusion of the whole Babylonian whoredom assembled under these roofs, and then—take whatever martyrdom the Lord God of Israel may please to assign me in his cause!'

'That shall you never! Or, by Heaven, take your martyrdom at once, then—and thus!' Richard Grimsorwe yelled; and either yielding to an uncontrollable impulse of the furious passions he inherited, though usually under the control of hypocrisy and artifice, or driven to frenzy by dread of the exposure threatened, he snatched up a cleaver from the dresser, where it had remained by chance after the general clearance made by the insane cook, and struck with such remorseless butcher rage at Adam Blackjack's skull, that he actually clove the unfortunate man's head in halves on his shoulders.

Sir Thomas Holte's horror must be imagined, not described. No pen could do the slightest justice to such a concussion of mind.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE GREAT GALLERY AT ASTON HALL.

MEANWHILE the member of this disastrous race, against whom the now murderer's artifices had been so specially directed, drank full of the bitter chalice forced on his lips. Dame Cooper held it up; and, truth to say, the good woman—little occasion as she had to exaggerate—at all events spared nothing in the way of woeful revealing to him.

Edward Holte thus acquired the full knowledge of the overwhelming calamity threatening him. His beauteous Dorothy—his loving bride, his adored wife, the mother of his unborn child—was condemned to be exposed during the whole day on the pillory, upon charges the most infamous and groundless, and had accepted her doom of disgrace and suffering rather than betray her plighted promises and faith to him. But, indeed, as Dame Cooper represented it, Dorothy dared not produce the evidence of her marriage, which must render impossible the detestable accusation of the Witch of Aston, while in the custody of Grim-sorwe's atrocious agents, who would infallibly seize upon and destroy it before it could reach the public cognizance.

And this danger was so imminent, so pressing—at hand, in point of fact—for at noonday, to which it wanted scarcely a quarter of an hour, Dorothy Firebrace was to be led forth to her degrading and unjust punishment.

Yet, what hope of salvation or rescue could there be?

Not only was Tubal Bromycham disabled, according to Dame Cooper's report, by his wound and weakness from rendering any active assistance; he was so exasperated and grief-struck by the intelligence of Dorothy's supposed disgrace and betrayal by the friend in whom he had trusted, that he refused to make any attempt to rescue his supposed paramour from the penalties of her folly and wickedness. And, besides, he had been almost frenzied by indignation at the vile part imputed to himself in the affair, and fancied that to labour at Dorothy's rescue would be to confess the villany he was accused of, and ruin him for ever in the opinion of the lady who was now enduring so much in his behalf. But even to him, Dame Cooper declared, she had not dared to confide the truth, knowing that the fanatic party were now completely in the ascendancy in the town, and that any attempt at rescue with such means as Tubal possessed, would but send him to his own destruction.

As for Firebrace, the old man thoroughly believed in his daughter's guilt, and was so infuriated by the conviction that he declared he himself would be the executioner to lead her up to the pillory. And when Dame Cooper had left Birmingham, availing herself of the opportunity of accompanying the loyalist deputation, the hateful instrument was in course of erection in the market-place, at the same time with the preparations for a bull-baiting, proclaimed in honour of the King's arrival.

No help could therefore be looked for in Birmingham. But out of it, what? When the King had so openly, on his royal faith, taken the town under his protection, and had prohibited his troops, under penalties so severe, to offer the people there the least obstruction or assault.

But for this Edward Holte would have assembled his troop at once, and have galloped into Birmingham to the rescue, since the barriers were now thrown down. But, under the circumstances, the only hope was to induce the King to take another view of the present unlawful proceedings of the Birmingham fanatics, and give such orders as would restrain their malice against the brave woman who had so materially aided in his own preservation.

Dame Cooper herself could suggest no other resource, voluble as her sorrow and sympathies exhibited themselves. Edward accordingly proceeded at once to seek an audience of the King.

Unluckily Charles, who was really in very royal appetite, and desired to get over the ceremonials of the day necessary before dinner, had made but a brief toilette, and was already in the Great Gallery of Aston Hall, engaged in the reception of the concourse of loyal nobility and gentry assembled to do him honour in its walls.

Entering by a side door known only to the inmates of the house, Edward found this extensive and noble apartment, still held to be one of the finest in England, crowded almost stemfull by the throngs eager to catch a glimpse of their sovereign, in whose cause they were prepared to hazard so much; those who deemed themselves of rank and eminence to justify their desiring the honour, pressing on to kiss his hand, where he sat throned in a recess at the end of the gallery.

Throned it might well be called. The part in question was raised by several steps above the floor of the long and lofty chamber, and being richly carpeted with crimson velvet, it was furnished with an arm-chair and canopy of perforated brass-work, on columns—a miracle of Tubal Bromycham's skill in the metal—and which shone like burnished gold. Sir Thomas Holte had always projected himself a visit from his sovereign, or perhaps thought the elevation would not be too grand and gorgeous for an *Earl of Birmingham* to occupy on solemn festivities; and while he was friendly with the town and its mechanic representative, thought he did but right to encourage its peculiar arts, and exhibit the perfection of its workmanship.

The King, artistically inclined himself, had at once taken the most admiring notice of the beautiful and splendid work, and declared, to the equally tasteful Marquis of Newcastle, who led him to it, and explained the fact that it was native art, that he had not thought he had subjects who could rival Italians in working the hard metals into patterns as light and elegant as lace.

Sir Thomas Holte, rather singularly, had not reappeared at the proper moment to do the honours of his mansion. Edward was, however, glad at the time to miss his presence in the gallery.

It might have been thought that the heir of Aston was anxious to supply the deficiency, from the eagerness with which he elbowed his way through the gorgeously arrayed Cavalier crowd to the sovereign's closer presence. Indeed, he seemed to some even rudely and violently progressive. The savage Goring, who was gazing up at the curiously arabesque ceiling, with folded arms, and yawning, found himself brusquely pushed aside, but had hardly time to shape a scowl and utter an oath, ere Edward Holte had hustled past him in his haste.

Lord Falkland's office always placed him near the King's person ; and he also noticed to his Majesty himself, the hurried approach.

'What is the matter with Captain Holte?' he said in a low tone to the King. 'He looks as if he comes to tell us that the Man of Nottingham is coming at speed to renew his attempt upon your Majesty's person.'

'He would find us better provided than then, Lucius,' replied Charles, with a proud smile and glance at the crowding multitude before him. 'And yet I should not like to hear 'twas so. That man's very name sounds always of an ill omen to my ear.'

By this time Edward had reached the dais, and had flung himself—deadly pale, indeed, and almost breathless—on his knees before the King.

Charles's attention, already startled, was fixed by this appearance of agitation, and he made a slight movement as if to rise, in some alarm. But considerations of dignity retained him in his chair. Only he looked with great surprise and inquiry at the young officer, and then said, with forced composure, 'Is it your pretended good folks of Birmingham, Master Holte, turned out *en masse* to assault us?'

'No, sire. Would to God it were so, that their fanatic cruelty and insolences might meet with just chastisement !' exclaimed Edward Holte. 'I come to complain to your Majesty now of their barbarous and masterful proceedings, not to defend them ; nay, to implore of you leave to put a stop by force of arms to their unlawful violences against the youthful woman who figured so heroically—as your Majesty has occasion to remember—in enabling me to give you notice of the designs of your enemies on your royal person, in time to baffle them, at Nottingham.'

'How so, sir?' replied Charles coldly. 'Are we never to hear the last of this great adventure? In which, besides, another forward gentleman of this house claims the greatest part.'

'But falsely, sire! Richard Grimsorwe is a traitor, and in league with your fanatic rebels everywhere ! There is no time, however, at present to expound all his villainies to your Majesty. It is enough to say that the man is doubtless at the bottom of all the atrocious plot which has consigned Dorothy Firebrace to public exposure, and probably to death itself, from the cruelty of a misguided mob, on the pillory in Birmingham. But your Majesty will not suffer your loyal and courageous deliveress to meet with such treatment from a vile fanatic rabble, instigated by all manner of lies and wicked scandals, and her devotion to your royal service, to her ruin !'

'As how is all this, sir?' Charles inquired, sedately crossing one leg over the other, glittering with the diamonded badge of the Garter. He preserved the ornaments of this order through all his extremities, even to the foot of the scaffold.

Thus required, Edward was compelled to declare, though in rapid and disordered strain, the nature of the infamous accusations brought against Dorothy Firebrace, and the unlawful trial and condemnation she had undergone at the hands of the self-constituted tribunal of the fanatics of Birmingham ; defending her, however, as yet, simply by

asserting her innocence and the unfairness and illegality of the proceedings against her.

To his utter amazement and indignation, nevertheless, this was the King's reply :

'Well, sir, if this girl be as you say she is, and affirm on your own honour, pure and innocent of all the charges against her as an angel of light, it only the more completely appears how totally justice and right are concerned in the due maintenance of our power and authority in the State. As it is, you yourself are the main cause why we cannot in any way interfere in the affair. You have assured us, against every information to the contrary, of the well-meaning and sobriety of action in all things of the people of our good town of Birmingham ; and thereupon we have solemnly guaranteed them full liberty and exemption from all control and interference of our present superior power. And that thence all men may know how well and fully we are resolved to observe every plight and promise we make, however completely in our power or not, I tell you the Birmingham folks must have their way, without let or hindrance on our part, on the penalties already by us denounced against all who presume to molest them.'

Edward was thunderstruck by the decision, which was pronounced in those inflexible tones he had learned to know could not be altered by reason or entreaty.

'But an innocent woman ! A woman who saved your Majesty's life at the risk of her own !' was all he could utter.

'How know we she is so innocent ?' returned Charles sharply. 'Her townfolk have, certes, better means to appreciate her character than a rash, enamoured boy, her lover.'

'Her lover, sire ! I am HER HUSBAND !' shouted Edward, in tones that echoed over the whole vast apartment, and made all start that heard the word. All but one ; and, amazingly, that one was Sir Thomas Holte.

He entered the gallery precisely as the word was pronounced ; and, it is true, with a strangely aghast and spectral look and action, but still most clearly in no connection with anything he heard.

He advanced, in a singularly dizzy and staggering manner, to the dais occupied by Charles, and, to everybody's surprise, ejaculated merely, 'Your pardon, sire ; I made a vain boast, and have lost my wager, if I made one ! My villanous master-cook turns out to be—to be one of the Birmingham fanatic madmen in secret ; and rather than cook a dinner for your royal Majesty, he has—has *disappeared*—and left all the preparations in such disorder, that although my son Richard—who has some skill in culinary art—he—he says—has set to work to repair the disaster, I—I fear dinner cannot be ready—for more than an hour from this !'

Certainly the King, though no special trencherman, looked more discomposed and annoyed by this announcement than at Edward's really tragical and exciting statements. But the rest of the audience, struck with the singular concussion of ideas produced within their minds by a knowledge of previous circumstances, burst into an outrageous peal of laughter.

Irascible as he was by nature, nevertheless Sir Thomas's only notice of this demonstration was the extraordinary and unexpected one of bursting into an hysterical passion of tears and sobs.

Charles himself was greatly surprised and somewhat touched with pity at so strange an outburst of feeling. But the consolation he offered was a singular one. 'The fanatics of Birmingham are not, however, so altogether harmful to you, Sir Thomas. Your son, Edward, confesses that he has made a blacksmith's daughter there his wife, and they are engaged probably at this moment in ridding you of the relationship by stoning her to death for offences of which he declares her altogether innocent !'

Inexpressibly to Edward's astonishment, his father replied, in broken accents still, 'I do believe her so ! Let Edward rescue her from their clutches, and bring back your Majesty's dinner, which the traitor cook has sent to Birmingham, under pretence you were to dine in the Guild-hall with the townsfolk, in token of a true reconciliation, and, if possible—if possible—the man.'

'Say you so !' replied Charles, flushing angrily. 'Truly such a trick as this was not set down in the bill of indemnity for these Birminghamers. Take your own troop of horse, Captain Holte, and bring me back my dinner and the master-cook ; and the last shall hang before I eat the first. Whatever else you do, young sir, is on your own responsibility.'

'Then, sire, I shall bring home MY WIFE to Aston Hall, who truly, by descent, is worthy to mate with the noblest here !' and without waiting further comment on his extraordinary speech, Edward hastened still more rapidly out of the Presence Chamber than he had entered it, with a glance at his friend Lord Falkland, that seemed to beg of him to undertake all advisable further explanation.

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

FOR DEATH OR LIFE.

SELDOM since Birmingham was a town had so strange a scene been witnessed in it as was presented at noonday on that memorable Sunday, October 16th, 1642, in the enclosed space before St. Martin's Church.

Directly in front of the building, but outside the graveyard, a wooden building of two stages had been erected, somewhat resembling a gallows. But its real dedication as a pillory was apparent in the balanced plank with holes for the head, on the top of a central tourniquet wheel. On this plank was usually painted in very large letters the particular offences for which the criminal was to undergo his degrading punishment, the mob in general proportioning their insults and pelting pretty fairly to the occasion, when it could read, which was not always the case. Poor Dorothy's pretended crimes were by no means softened in the expressions devoted to their setting forth on the engine of punishment, in this in

stance, and were certainly well calculated to rouse the indignation of a populace among which there would be many women and mothers.

The executioner, who had already taken his station on the engine, was a very suitable one to have shared the punishment, if his wife's account of his doings might be credited. It was Sisyphus, the bellows-blower; attended, however, by Faithful Moggs, doubtless to perform such part of the duty as might require the use of hands. And never had the wretch exhibited the fiendish passions and cruelty of his nature more conspicuously in his evil countenance than on this occasion. If one could conceive the expression of a wolf athirst for blood transferred to human features, such would have been that of this man. And yet he looked agitated; very pallid, with constant bursts of a dark sweat on his forehead, like a criminal listening to the pleadings against him before his judge.

The instrument of disgrace and suffering was surrounded by a guard of the Anabaptists, whose gloomy craving visages were turned towards Sisyphus as a leader with a peculiar degree of significance. And it was remarked that they were specially well armed and prepared as if for active violence, though only supposed to attend to prevent any efforts at a rescue on the part of the friends of the person condemned. Though that need scarcely have been feared, since Dorothy's father himself was to give her up to what he considered her just chastisement.

Around these bitter factionists clustered the rest of the most zealous and fanatic portion of the populace of Birmingham, while, separated only by some twenty or thirty yards, was an extremely different assemblage, and central object. The royalists of the town, not numerous in themselves, but nightly strengthened now by the neighbourhood of their King and his powerful army, were gathered there, with a host of yelping dogs of various degrees of fierceness and size, held in by the collar, awaiting the signal to be let slip at a vast and portentous-looking animal of the bovine species, which was raging, roaring, champing, within the limits of a massive chain that fastened it round the neck to the Bull Ring in the midst of the market-place. The vast bulk and strength of this creature, its eyes rolling fire, its side-lashing tail, its foam-slavering mouth, its mixture of terror with ferocity, under the unusual circumstances in which it was placed, rendered it a spectacle of dread even to those who expected to derive sport from its fury and agonies of resistance. In reality this was the terrible and far-famed Bull of Aston, of whose ravages Sir Thomas Holte had at last himself grown weary, or else desired more signally to testify his satisfaction at the King's arrival, and affront the aversion entertained by the Puritans for all kinds of diversions, by offering it as a sacrifice on the occasion. Moreover, a proclamation had been made that, on the conclusion of the 'baiting' the bull was to be slaughtered, and his carcass handed over to all who chose to go in for a share, while there was anything to divide. Socialism in beef!

If to these two main, and in strong respects opposed, groups, we add that all the rest of the enclosure before St. Martin's was crowded with a nearly complete assemblage of the townsfolk—the amusements provided being adapted to every taste and shade of religious and political opinion—we have a notion of the kind of spectacle to which Dorothy

Firebrace was led from the Parsonage by 'Angel' Whitehall and his Elders, on the day, and at the hour named, for punishment.

To complete the degradation, as it was intended, of the unfortunate daughter of Armourer Firebrace, she was compelled to make her appearance in the streets wrapped in a long white linen sheet, and with a lighted torch in her hand—emblems of purity, which were to be taken from her on being fixed in the pillory; before which the victim was usually stripped of all upper clothing, to be more freely exposed to the derision and missiles of the lookers-on. But there are some figures and countenances which it is impossible to bring down to the level, even of the most degrading situations. Death himself is at times powerless to destroy the ensigns of natural nobility, or efface the stamp of heroic spirits from their deserted material tenements. And it was thus with Dorothy Firebrace. Extremely pale as she was, all her fine features expressed as noble a haughtiness and resolution as ever, and her step and carriage were stately and erect as a queen's, as if with the consciousness rather of an approaching triumph and glorious exaltation than of punishment and shame.

In truth, Dorothy felt that the moment she could safely produce the evidence of her innocence, she should have endured as much as she ought, in love and duty to her husband, and that his honour as well as her own and her unborn child's, required that everything should be risked in declaring the truth. Accordingly, extrication appeared easy enough, when once she should find herself under a public presence, which in her case she believed would immediately prove a public protection.

It is true that the wife of Sisyphus, whose constant attendance she had not only accepted, but earnestly requested in her captivity—half savage as she was, she was still a woman!—had not failed to infuse her own jealous suspicions of the bellows-blower and his designs. But the contempt and loathing of Dorothy for the villanous fellow were such that she could not bring herself to consider the statements as aught but the effusions of the very madness of the passion that possessed Cut-throat Meg. Far less could she bring herself to fear so vile an enemy. The terrible woman herself was meanwhile a great protection against the traitorous Anabaptist's designs. Nothing could exceed her watchfulness and determination in guarding the prisoner, but chiefly against what she conceived to be the insidiously amorous designs of her husband—not without reason. Nevertheless, she had strangely abandoned her post on the morning of the execution of the sentence of pillorying the victim, as if, her jealousy being satisfied, she thought vengeance might be better gratified from amidst the spectators.

Whitehall and his Elders entered the market-place in their strange costume, with the intended victim in the midst of them, chanting doleful hymns, as if at a funeral; and among these, to the wonder of every one and approbation only of the most violent fanatics, came Armourer Firebrace. But no one who contemplated the grief-worn and shame-struck visage of the old man could avoid perceiving what agonies he endured under his forced outward stoicism and stubbornly resolved manner.

With all his determination, however, it was observed that the un-

happy parent's resolution nearly gave way when, arriving at the foot of the hateful erection, it became his self-imposed task to lead or compel his child to mount it. He turned and clutched her hand convulsively, as if for one of these purposes, pointing with his unengaged finger to the inscription on the pillory, but suddenly paused, staggered, and might perhaps have fallen, had not Dorothy herself sprung forward and caught him in her arms.

'Courage, dear father !' she then exclaimed, for the first time melting into a passion of tears and sobs. 'Lead on. All will be well presently ! I can explain all. Only let me know that the people hear and see what shall occur.'

Firebrace dizzily rallying, gave a vacant, uncomprehending stare, and renewed his effort ; but, in good truth, it was rather Dorothy that led and supported her unhappy sire up the ladder-like ascent of the pillory, than he who urged her on to her appointed scene of punishment.

A loud yell, mingled with murmurs from the royalists, greeted the appearance of the heroic girl on the platform of the pillory. But it was rather from the detestable glare in Sisyphus's lustful eyes that the wife of Edward Holte shrank, for a moment, back, than this uproar.

On the contrary, rejecting with scorn his offered hook-hand in mounting the last step, which was higher than the rest, she seemed to regard with satisfaction the great assemblage, clamour against her how it might.

Meanwhile, as the bull roared more lustily than ever, startled by the rival noise, making the most violent efforts to break from his rope, and as the Elders had not ceased their funeral chanting, the frightful mixture of sounds may be conceived.

There was a general lull, however, when Whitehall, the Angel of Birmingham, as he styled himself, followed up the victim on the pillory, and plainly, by his gestures, announced an intention to harangue the auditory. His speeches—composed, as for the most part they were, of lunatic ravings and prophecies—were yet of a kind that fell aptly in with the religious humour of the times and of the excited populace of Birmingham.

Contrary to expectation, however, instead of commencing with what seemed the immediate subject of Dorothy Firebrace's offences, Whitehall, screaming out as a text, '*They have encompassed me as with bulls of Bashan,*' burst into a vehement denunciation of the intended bull-baiting.

The Cavaliers, he said, had purposely contrived the exhibition with a view to involve the town in the sin and desecration of the Sabbath-day, and also to introduce the systematic violation set forth, and ordered on penalties to be observed, in what was called 'the Book of Sports' of the late tyrant, James Stuart, which the devil himself must have edited. But the Angel announced his resolve, on the other hand, to permit no such blasphemy and affront to the Lord, in the town placed under his charge and government in Christ ; and that, therefore, he had ordered the 'Guard of the Amen' to disperse its ungodly companions and rabble, and keep the creature quietly for slaughter on the following day, for the benefit of the poor of the town.

But upon this statement, Robin Falconer, who, with some other

retainers of Aston, and the aid of two large mastiffs, had driven the animal to the Bull Ring, roared out, at the top of his voice, that if the least attempt of the kind was made, he would cut the rope, and let it loose among the Roundhead rascals that should dare such an insolency against his master and the King's Majesty!

Whitehall turned with some perplexity to the captain of his guardsmen upon this, but was rather surprised at the singular change of tone exhibited by Sisyphus.

'What the foul fiend are you prating here, minister,' he said, 'about bulls and baiting and such like matters—nothing concerning the real business in hand? But the town has been too long already in a government of raving lunatics; and you cannot now call upon your pretended Tubal Saul for assistance, who is himself all but dead, and as bereft of understanding as the rest of you! Moreover, the Lord has sent me a vision to inform me that He is not content with your way of doing things, and allowing Antichrist and his legions a free passage through it, and has therefore ordered me to take upon myself the absolute rule and governance of this place of Birmingham! Take your celestial paradise where else you will! But as proof that the Lord is with me, and is willing that the people here shall inherit the Kingdom on Earth, lo, I expect every moment the arrival from Aston Hall of a great banquet, prepared for the King and his nobles' own gluttony, but which by prayer I have enforced should leave Sir Thomas Holte's kitchen, and be brought by his own scullions and servitors for us of Birmingham to feast upon! And it shall be as a coronation feast for a *King*! For by that name and title, but not of an earthly grant or confirmation, do I take upon me henceforth the rule of the town! And yonder, yonder the glorious banquet comes!'

In reality several waggons and carts, which seemed laden with hamper of provisions, now lumbered slowly into the market-place, under convoy of certain of the servitors of the kitchen at Aston Hall, whom the master-cook had deceived into escorting the materials of the royal banquet to the Guildhall of Birmingham. Adam Blackjack's confidential intercourse with the Anabaptist leader sufficiently explained his knowledge and profane use of the fact.

Whitehall was singularly taken aback by this bold self-assertion of the rival prophet, but after a moment's staring at him with great bewilderment, exclaimed, 'No, no, no! you are a villanous liar and impostor! Where is it anywhere written that the King of the Word should be maimed of his limbs, and with an iron hook for a hand? Moreover, it cannot be, for I AM HE? Good people all, hear me. The time for the manifestation must needs have arrived when a traitorous impostor like this—and, moreover, have I not seen and overcome that other monstrous delusion and temptation of the fiend, under the likeness of the Morning Star? Therefore do I now openly avow and proclaim—'

But at this moment the unfortunate 'Angel' felt a hook passed round his neck, which drew him back with nearly strangling violence. Then Sisyphus thrust himself in front, full in the view of his adherents, yelling out, 'Stone him! stone him! He has spoken blasphemy. Yet this

woman is in reality the predicted Star of the Morning, who is to beam at the right hand of the throne of glory on earth! Wherefore I claim her as my wife and empress, and as such she shall reign with me among ye. Speak, Dorothy Firebrace!' he concluded, turning to the amazed daughter of Armourer Firebrace, with his diabolical expressions of all kinds fearfully heightened, yet speaking in an undertone which she only could overhear. 'Speak to the people; acknowledge me as your husband and king, or I will give you up to every shame and contumely the worst mob can inflict upon you; and if you survive their injuries, will rend you to pieces with this iron claw myself! Nay, never glare among them for the hag to assist you who pretended you so much kindness! Neither dread her any more, for she is where even her savagery must be out-devilled and quelled!'

'You have murdered your wife, then, monster!' replied Dorothy, in a loud voice; but although every particle of hope deserted her, her brave nature was not yet subdued, or the resources of her courage and resolution at an end. 'Well, as you say, I will speak to the people,' she continued. 'Hear me, ye men of Birmingham!'

Universal attention and curiosity were now fixed upon the pillory platform; and bewildered by all they heard, but evidently expecting, from Sisyphus's own statement, some clearer explanation, a unanimous shout of 'Hear her! hear the Armourer's Daughter!' and a hustling up to the scene of action, testified the general interest.

'In the first place, then,' pursued Dorothy, in bright, ringing accents, that reached the farthest in the crowd, 'I do avouch myself most innocent of the infamous crimes imputed to me by the malignant calumnies of a witch and other my enemies, and engraven on yonder hideous cross-beam; in the proof of which I now declare to you, women and men of Birmingham, that I am the *lawfully wedded wife* of Edward Holte, wedded here, in your church of St. Martin's, and the mother of an unborn but most lawful heir to Aston Hall! The proof of which I will speedily place before you. And who will then deem it possible I could be guilty, as I have been accused? Sirs! I stood solemnly pledged to my husband, and certain of my friends, true witnesses of the truth I announce to you, not to reveal our marriage without his consent. But in this extremity I know he would approve the public declaration I now make—nay, would himself be here to make it, did not some unknown but forcible circumstances, I am certain, hinder his presence by my side! Moreover, I have had no possibility of communicating with him until this morning, when Dame Cooper undertook the task, but perchance has not sped upon it. Nay, villain! you shall not hinder me!' concluded the heroic woman, cluding the fling of the bellows-blower's hook by rushing to the very verge of the platform, and suddenly flinging down the torch she still bore, she rent open the bodice of her gown, and produced a paper, which she flourished aloft, calling aloud, 'Behold! here is the certificate of the marriage of Dorothy Firebrace, of Birmingham, with Edward Holte, Esq., of Aston Hall, in the Church of St. Martin, by the Rev. Mr. Lane, witnessed by the High Bailiff Cooper and his wife!'

'My daughter! my dearest, wronged child, is this so?' exclaimed

the Armourer, who had pushed fiercely between his child and Sisyphus, on observing the bellows-blower's brutal attempt.

'It is, my father! Here are the lines. I place in your hands henceforth the assurance of your daughter's purity and honour as the wife of the Heir of Aston!' returned Dorothy, placing the important document in her father's quivering grasp.

'God be praised! It is all as she has said. My daughter is a most true and pure and honourable *wife*! And true it is, and I witness it, the young man himself asked her of me, her father, in lawful though secret marriage, which I refused to allow!' the Armourer now ejaculated in a transport of joy. 'My child, my child! I thought to lead you to a doom of shame and anguish for your guilt! But you are innocent, God be praised! God be praised! Good people, after what you have heard, are you not well content I should lead my daughter in peace and honour home?'

And the people of Birmingham indeed—all but the ferocious Anabaptist minority—moved, as the masses almost always are, by generous and enthusiastic impulses, surprised and elevated by the extraordinary exhibition of courage, and skilful refutation of her enemies on the part of the youthful woman before them, burst into a perfect uproar of applause and assent.

An uproar which seemed rather to grow than diminish for several minutes, while Sisyphus continued to gesticulate frantically to the crowd, unheard amidst the noise. But on a sudden, losing all patience, he pointed to the torch which still remained burning on the platform, and yelled to Faithful Moggs, 'Set her on fire in her sheet, and burn the paper too, if you are any follower of mine!'

Moggs raised the torch, though with evident slowness and reluctance, and muttered in reply, 'Nay, master; let us rather do as you said before, and carry her off to the Black Chapel, to be made your queen and wife for a thousand years. Only, to be sure, Cut-throat Meg is there.'

'No, she is not. All will be well enough for her. She drowned herself while I was attempting to immerse her for baptism in the Pool of Life, in order that I might restore her to be my wife, after divorcing her,' Sisyphus stammered forth.

'Then I denounce this wretch as a murderer! The poor woman herself told me, gnashing her teeth with causeless hatred, that her husband had grown to detest me for my scorn, and that if she would consent to be brought into his pale of belief, he would receive her again as his wife. He has doubtless drowned her under this pretence!' cried Dorothy.

'How long must I endure the slandering lies of this accursed harlot?' stormed Sisyphus, appealing with his frightful claw to his satellites closely surrounding the pillory. Good men! guards of the throne, who shall share in all my perquisites and exaltations, come up to me here, and do as I shall tell you to the flagitious slut!'

A movement and clambering on all sides of a variety of grim and haggard figures, up the poles and timbers of the scaffolding, followed upon this appeal; and for the first time Dorothy's courage failed her in the

extremity of the horror and disaster of the fate that seemed inevitably to await her.

Not completely, however ; for, perceiving that her father was seized by two of the ruffianly followers of the bellows-blower, she snatched the marriage certificate from his hand as he was extending it from their clutches, and flung it into the air over the scrambling wretches' heads below.

'If there be any human creature there, let him preserve this paper !' Dorothy shrieked. 'As for me, I will rather leap from this scaffolding and perish than—Great Heaven ! what is here ? It is Edward—Edward Holte—it is my husband—comes !'

By a most fortunate turn and conjunction of good hap, at this moment the precious document fluttered away in the wind to the very ring of the chain in the market-place that confined the bull ; and the clatter of the hoofs of a body of cavalry, approaching at a gallop, was distinctly and closely audible.

The practised ear of the maimed soldier readily divined the meaning of the sound.

'The Cavaliers are upon us ; the King, as usual, breaks his word. But vengeance at least is mine !' and he broke from the feeble restraint Whitehall attempted to put upon him, doubtless with a view to effect some murderous seizure of Dorothy Firebrace.

In reality, the poor girl had only one resource to avoid the blow aimed at her neck, and which would probably have broken it, by the wretch with his barbarous hook. And yet redemption and happiness seemed close at hand, for her words, as she flung herself over the platform of the pillory, were, 'Edward, Edward—my husband ! save me !'

Ay, and in truth, by some miracle of good fortune, Edward, distancing all who followed him, at the sight of the scaffold and its victim, surrounded by enemies, arrived just in time to save her !—to catch his young wife in his arms as she fell from the considerable height she had leaped, in his faithful arms. And being on horseback, at no great descent ; so that although Dorothy swooned, and lay in them for several minutes afterwards insensible, she received no really dangerous hurt.

Sisyphus perceived that his victim had escaped his vengeance. But the mischievous activity of his mind suggested still some means of harm to her, and slinging himself down the poles of the scaffolding, on the opposite side from the approaching cavalry, he made his way through the crowd towards the Bull Ring, doubtless with a view to possess himself of the document flown thither, and forgetful, in the absorption of his hatred and cupidity, of the terrific guard upon it.

'Master Grimsorwe will yet make this scrap worth the trouble of picking up,' he muttered to himself, giving a dive at the paper, which lay below the chained bull's hind-quarters. But almost at the same instant it turned, and with an astounding roar set its monstrous head almost close to the ground, and goring at Sisyphus with its horns, his very attempt at saving himself proved his destruction, for his hook got entangled in the weapons of the awful brute, and he was caught and tossed aloft into the air !

A spectacle of indescribable horror, though a brief one, followed—so

horrible, that Edward Holte himself, the moment his attention was attracted to it by the screams and confusion of the immediate spectators, directed his troopers to discharge their carbines at the ferocious animal, as the only chance of a rescue. And it was a bullet from his own pistol that finally entered the Bull of Aston's spine, and laid it a mass of slaver and blood beside the breathless figure of a maimed man, so mangled, gored, and trampled, that it seemed as if scarcely a limb or a lineament remained whole.

Singularly enough, the document which occasioned the tragedy remained entirely uninjured and untrampled, and Robin Falconer picked it up from nigh the palpitating carcass of the bull, and carried it to his young master. And as soon as Dorothy was sufficiently recovered to be left in the arms of her father, Edward himself mounted the erection which had been prepared for her disgrace and ignominy, and read the certificate aloud to all the people, and called upon them all to witness that he acknowledged the Armourer's Daughter for his true and lawful wife, and the mother of his legitimate heirs.

The Anabaptists in general, after the death of their leader, ventured on no further measures of resistance; and some of them, perhaps, thought he was not unworthy of his fate when, about a week after, a frightfully mutilated corpse, with a heavy stone tied round its neck, floated up in the pond where he had instituted a horribly profane imitation of a baptism into his new religion, and which was recognised by most people as the body of his wretched wife, Cut-throat Meg—murdered herself, undoubtedly, in turn !

CHAPTER LXXIX.

THE PARDON.

AFTER these surprising events Edward Holte determined on his course of action with a promptness of decision and resolution which formed part, in reality, of his apparently gentle and modest character.

He intruded no further on the proceedings of the Birminghamers than to order back to Aston Hall the entire provisions for the royal banquet, and then resolved to return thither at once with his wife, and acknowledge her as such to his father and all the assembled magnates there. This great recompense he believed himself to owe to her wonderful love and fidelity.

Firebrace himself, in his anxiety to retrieve the good name of his daughter, made no objection to the proposal. But Dorothy, as soon as she revived sufficiently to understand its purport, at first evinced reluctance to the idea of thrusting herself upon a family which refused to entertain her willingly in the capacity of the wife of its representative.

Edward, nevertheless, overruled the legitimately proud feeling of his wife by the necessity of re-establishing her reputation clearly to all the world, and the right of his future offspring.

Accordingly, after a scene of the most affecting reconciliation and

parting with her father. Dorothy Holle accompanied her husband on his return to Aston Hall at the head of his troop of horse.

The events that had passed, and the interval required for Dorothy's complete restoration, had occupied much time. Nevertheless the royal banquet ordered for noonday had only just been served, at sunset, when the youthful pair arrived at the mansion.

Having ascertained that the King had just sat down to dinner, in the grand dining-room of the Hall, Edward took his post at once, and, with his young wife leaning on his arm, entered the apartment. And in this manner he advanced with the Armourer's Daughter to the head of the table, where Charles sat under a canopy, with the principal guests on either hand, and craved leave to present her, under that designation, to the monarch, both falling on their knees as he did so.

Charles seemed now in a singularly changed mood of good spirit and urbanity. Not, however, caused by so unkingly a reason as the restoration of his dinner, but by the news that had now been for some time circulated, that his beloved Queen had landed in safety, with arms and ammunition from Holland, in Burlington Bay. He was well disposed therefore to a favourable entertainment of the young pair, whose well-matched beauty and grace probably also struck his artistic eye.

'You and your fair bride are very welcome, Master Holte. Let room be made for them at our table, and we will hear the story of the rescue. Why, Falkland, does not this read like a chapter of old romance? Or, methinks I am myself the banished Duke in gentle Willie's play, sanctifying the espousals of Orlando and the madcap, merry Rosalind! At least, if our host's good sanction runs before, as in all reason it should.'

The King glanced over on these words to Sir Thomas Holte, who sat at the opposite end of the board, but with a singularly excited, and, as it seemed to Edward, inebriated look. And this unhappy supposition was rendered still more certain by the extraordinary nature of Sir Thomas's reply.

'Ay, my good liege, and if you will let your royal nephew marry as far beneath himself as my son, and will not look too *nicely in the Hiding Hole of my Hall!*'

'Your father has drunk my health too loyally to-day, Master Holte,' said Charles, with a look of grave displeasure.

'No, by the Three Kings, my liege! I adore Miss Holte, and will never marry any other woman while I live!' exclaimed Prince Rupert, who, to say the truth, looked as if he had joined in his intended father-in-law's potations almost as liberally.

'Ay, ay, Prince; but first we must remove the spell—the witch's spell, you know. I have had old Maud seized and lodged in the church steeple to-night, and have sent for a man called the Witch-Finder, somewhere out of Bedford, to put her to tortures, and confess, and take off the spell,' Sir Thomas replied, wagging his head curiously at Rupert. 'But meanwhile we must have pardon for any little offence which we, or our friends, may have exceeded in the rigid performance of our duty, from the King's Majesty, and then all will be well. But I cannot forget, the fellow's mother was an injured fool to die as she did!'

Edward felt now convinced of his father's condition ; but fearful to direct further attention to it, he quietly procured a seat at the banquet for Dorothy. Nevertheless, on the King's inquiry, 'Well, Master Holte, and heard you aught in Birmingham of this traitor cook?' Sir Thomas suddenly uttered an exclamation, and started up, gasping and clutching at the air.

Edward was immediately by his side, and earnestly entreated him to withdraw to his private chamber.

'Why, yes, son Edward, I believe it will be best ; I am not my own perfect man just now,' said Sir Thomas, allowing himself to be led staggeringly out of the apartment.

But on reaching the vestibule he turned to Edward with a most singularly aghast and horrified look, and exclaiming, 'Ask Richard Grimsorwe the reason !' fell down, apparently in a state of insensibility, which his son began to suspect was caused by something more than excess in liquor.

Horried by the supposition that entered his mind, he sent for his mother to attend the baronet on his couch, whither he had him conveyed, and then determined to seek an explanation with his detestable enemy-brother. He conceived it even advisable to let him know how fully all his villany was understood, and the punishments justly in store, as the best means to convince him that all future operations of his malice would be strictly watched and guarded against. Still, as being now the only representative of the family left to entertain the King, he found it necessary to return to the banquet until its conclusion.

To his surprise, however, on making for the dining-room, he found Richard Grimsorwe apparently in waiting for him in the hall.

No other person was there. The servants of the house and of the royal guests were engaged in the inner chamber, in attendance at the banquet. And as it was now growing dark, Edward, aware of the diabolical acts of which his bastard brother was capable, almost imagined he had posted himself in this deserted spot to assassinate him. Grimsorwe, besides, carried a dark lantern, no ray of which he suffered to escape so as to throw any inconvenient light on his own person as he presented himself full in Edward's way. But still it was clear that he desired to be seen and recognised at once, and that therefore it was not likely (other probabilities apart) that he meant anything personally harmful.

His voice was also strangely agitated, and yet undertoned and quiet. 'Edward,' he said, 'I sought you.'

'For what purpose, ruthless villain?'

'Hush, foolish gentleman ! Let our senseless rivalry be over ! A suspicion, a look, a word, may deprive both of us of the object of contention, which alone has rendered us enemies. The Aston inheritance depends on a word, a breath, a suspicion, to be dispersed to the winds !'

'What mean you, madman ? Madman, I call you, as the best excuse for your atrocities, and for my not at once throwing myself upon you, for death or life.'

'My enmity with you, Edward Holte, finished this morning, when my father's mad fury placed in scarcely redeemable peril the inheritance for which we contend.'

‘Unnatural ruffian ! what mean you?’

‘Look there ! Take this lantern, and throw its light on the object you will behold within yonder contrived secret place, which only my father, the mason who fashioned it, and yourself, as heir, should be aware of.’

So Richard Grimsorwe replied, leading the way towards what seemed a large porter’s chair, of some ruddy wood, set in a recess on the left hand of the great hall staircase.

Edward, aware of the secret concealed by this external appearance, and in a manner fascinated and enthralled, followed.

Grimsorwe took the large wooden arm-chair, seemingly contrived only for a porter’s sitting, by the arm, and giving it a peculiar touch and swing, it turned, and revealed a dark inner chamber, of no great size, and only high enough to allow of a man of ordinary stature to enter it stoopingly.

‘Take the lantern, and tell me what you see in there,’ said Grimsorwe, handing his lamp to Edward.

Strongly controlled by his manner, the latter took it, and paced into the chamber, keeping his eye at first glancing backward ; which Grimsorwe observing, retired to some distance.

What then did Edward’s horrified glance light upon ?

The bleeding corpse of a man. Of a man whose skull appeared to be cloven in halves ; and, nevertheless, the two sides of whose face, if rejoined, it appeared to his horror-stricken conviction, must be that of Adam Blackjack, the master-cook of Aston Hall.

Edward gazed for several minutes, without being able to realise this terrible vision to himself. But Grimsorwe’s voice recalled him to sense.

‘For Heaven’s sake, Edward, make no further delay. You see what my father has done ? In his fury at the discovery of what I confess I did not conceal from him, your disastrous marriage, and Adam Blackjack’s insane taking up with the fanatics of Birmingham, and sending the King’s dinner off there, he snatched at the nearest weapon, and killed the wretched man with his own cleaver.’

‘Merciful Jesus !—but this accounts for my father’s terrible state of excitement and gloom.’

‘It does ; I, who alone witnessed the deed, only by the help of wine and strong drinks, have succeeded in bringing Sir Thomas to sufficient calm not to betray his own rashness to all our destruction. You remember what befell the family of Birmingham. We should have been betrayed to the same ; we are in no great favour with the King, do what we will, though you can plead great services, Edward. We should have been exposed, you chiefly, and the wife and unborn child you falsely suppose I have meant mischief against, to all the penalties of felons. Forfeiture of goods is the least among these, and there are hundreds of courtiers ready to grasp at our destruction. Of course, scanty as are the hopes I may yet cherish of our father’s treating me as his son, may be, I yet know that for the family to lose all could be no advantage to any member of it ; and I have therefore aided him so far to the best of my ability in concealing the dreadful crime.’

Edward, who knew the violence and fury of his father's temper, and of the provocations to its display, listened in aghast horror, but full belief, to what he heard.

'Great God ! what is to be done ?' he gasped.

'This,' replied Richard Grimsorwe. 'We must obtain the King's pardon in general for my father for every imaginable offence, under pretence of shielding him from the consequences of his energetic exertions on behalf of the King, before any begging courtier is aware how rich a prize is thus placed within grasp. This very night you must ask of the King his signature to a pardon, which I will draw up in the fullest imaginable, and yet vaguest terms of the law, as if our father might by possibility have incurred such inferences in the exercise of his endeavours to keep this country for his Majesty ; and you must obtain the signature to greet Sir Thomas's waking, or it is my belief he will commit suicide in his despair. Nor do I pretend, Edward Holte,' the bastard brother concluded, 'that here our enmity and rivalry will cease ; but we must care to keep something to struggle for, which otherwise cannot be.'

'Oh, my unhappy father ! and I was probably the cause why his passions so completely mastered his judgment ! Richard Grimsorwe, do what thou hast said, and, although from thy felonious hand, I will present the pardon to the King for signature, and obtain it in full satisfaction for all myself and my wife have ventured in his behalf, as the only favour I will ever ask of him during my miserable existence.'

Edward Holte returned to the banquet, and assumed his father's place at the foot of the table.

He found that his wife had already established herself in the royal and general favour by her manners, at once full of dignity and vivacity, and her simple yet eloquent description of the recent events in Birmingham. The King found himself sufficiently interested to question her further, and with great minuteness, concerning the attempt upon his person at Nottingham, which she had assisted in foiling, and expressed himself highly satisfied at the conclusion.

'This woman is one of Shakespeare's women,' he remarked, with unusual warmth for him, to the listening courtiers ; 'and I doubt if even the women of Sparta or Rome equalled those noble creatures he has drawn from the pure and high-hearted women of England, though he has placed them in so many different countries and scenes. I am glad, I say, to have seen a woman who realises to me the noblest ideas of that greatest of poets. Mistress Holte, your King thankfully drinks to your health and happiness.'

Edward played as well as he could the part of courteous host and representative of his family throughout the evening, yet he thought the King would never retire ; and indeed he sat unusually late, listening with constantly revived interest to Dorothy's account of the circumstances of her rescue, and of the state of things and parties in Birmingham.

Very shortly before his Majesty did at last retire to rest, a paper was put in Edward's hands by a person in a lawyer's costume, who glided in, and then immediately glided out.

Charles, however, in the end, professed himself tired, and anxious for a night's repose. Edward was at once in readiness to escort his Majesty to his chamber, with an immense candelabrum in hand, which had been prepared for the occasion.

The great majority of the banqueters accompanied the King to his bed-chamber door; but only Edward Holte, Lord Falkland, and his Majesty's immediate body-servants, entered it with him.

King Charles, pleased with the evident efforts made to treat him royally, in the magnificent furniture of the apartment and the velvet hangings of the alcove in which his bed was placed, assured Edward that, although grieved at his father's indisposition, he ascribed it altogether to its true causes, fatigue and over-loyalty in his potations. When the young man tremulously informed his Majesty that Sir Thomas was in reality tormented by fears that he had exceeded the law in various ways, in vindication of his royal legitimate authority against the Birminghamers, and other rebels and fanatics, like the late Earl Strafford, and could only be restored from his apprehensions by a general pardon for any of the offences he might have committed, signed by the Sign-manual—a document, Edward concluded by stating, with great agitation, he had regularly drawn up, and which required only his royal hand to it.

So saying, he produced the form of pardon engrossed by Grimsorwe, which he himself had scarcely had any time to glance at.

Charles laughingly remarked, 'Give it me. I presume this pardon is required for such offences chiefly as you have committed yourself to-day, Master Holte, in suppressing the violence and insolence of your townsmen of Birmingham.' And scarcely looking, either, at the document, he took up a pen that was placed in a silver inkstand for his use, and affixed his royal signature. 'Put yours also, Falkland,' he said. 'It is the new form, the Parliament requires so much, and you will be glad to do anything to oblige your friend.'

Lord Falkland took the pen in turn, but with characteristic consideration glanced down the paper.

'Sweet Lord! what is all here?' he then exclaimed. 'Sir Thomas's pardon for *murder* and *bigamy*! Murder and bigamy—and fire-raising, and masterful oppression, and I wot not well all beside! What can be the meaning of this?'

'Sign it, Falkland, sign it, dear friend; 'tis but a form of the lawyers, to include every imaginable offence in a general pardon, that no cavil may ever after be raised upon the instrument.'

Grimsorwe had, in fact, informed Edward that he should put in several offences besides the real one, that no special attention might be drawn to it until circumstances should compel the explanation of the mystery. The body, he declared, could be very well kept hidden until the King's departure, when Sir Thomas Holte's rash but not unjustifiable act must be explained, and to any objections the King's full pardon pleaded.

Charles was to proceed on his warlike advance to London on the following day.

On his friend's remonstrance, Falkland countersigned the document,

and once in possession of it, Edward took reverential leave and good-night, and resolved to hasten to his father's apartment, and relieve him from the horrible anxiety under which he believed him to labour.

On the way, however, Grimsorwe met him.

'Sir Thomas is in a deep sleep—I have just come from him—do not awaken him to a wretchedness that may perhaps madden him!' he observed in an agitated tone. 'Moreover, Edward, he begged that throughout this miserable affair, he might not be exposed to stand degraded before you—before his most virtuous son—in your actual presence, I mean! He begged me to do all that was necessary between you, him, and the King. Give me the pardon, if you have obtained it; and though I will not attempt to hide your merits in the affair, our father needs not stand utterly degraded beneath your observation, whom he most respects!'

Deceived by this moving appeal, Edward was about to hand the paper over to his false-hearted brother, when Dorothy suddenly appeared on the scene, escorted by some of the females of the household.

'Do nothing this traitorous wretch, your pretended brother, bids you, Edward!' she exclaimed. 'Nothing—nothing whatever! I have just made my way to the prison door of your unhappy sister, which no one can open, and who accuses the wretch of all that has happened most unhappily for herself, as we may for ourselves. Do nothing he asks, bids, prays, implores of you!'

This vehement expostulation was the cause why Edward Holte refused to deliver the signed pardon into the hands of Richard Grimsorwe, who had his uses to make of it; who even at last, in his rage, partly avowed them. 'Keep it, then!' he exclaimed. 'It is but the clearer proof of Sir Thomas Holte's offences, whose lawful heir I am, and will prove myself—before the PARLIAMENT OF ENGLAND!'

And in reality, on the following day, when Edward entered into explanations with his father, and heard from the enraged and exasperated old man who was the real murderer of Adam Blackjack, the real murderer was nowhere to be found at Aston Hall.

CHAPTER XC.

THE WITCH OF ASTON'S END.

It appeared that Sir Thomas Holte had been induced by Grimsorwe's entreaties and appeals to the memory of his unhappy mother, and the natural shrinking of a parent from consigning his offspring to destruction, to assist in hiding the body of the murdered cook, and consenting to conceal the dreadful fact until a pardon could be obtained for the perpetrator of the deed. He was to use his own influence, and gain Edward's assistance for his bastard-brother's redemption, if possible. And certainly the King could scarcely refuse condonation for an offence which could be represented so completely in his service, and almost authorised by his own threats of vengeance. But the wicked wretch, working on his own secret plans, proffered also to avert all risk from himself by

throwing the guilt on his father. With this intention he had doubtless stimulated Sir Thomas to drown his horror and apprehensions in too copious libations ; or—as was still more probable—had infused some powerful narcotic in his drink, that had deprived him of his reasonable senses long enough to enable him to complete his manœuvres in the atrocious manner described.

Nevertheless, Sir Thomas perceived that he was entangled beyond hope of extrication in the artful mesh thus looped together.

He felt it would be impossible for him to prove his innocence. His wager on his cook's punctuality, his own well-known violent temper, his agitation and other singular behaviour after the tragical occurrence, his concealment of it, his lack of all witnesses, save one that would certainly be against him, his legitimate son's obtaining him a pardon, —every tittle of proof and evidence seemed turned irreversibly against him.

Even Grimsorwe's flight afforded the victim no support to any declaration of the truth. The artful villain left a letter directed to the King himself, containing a long recital of his alleged wrongs, in being deprived of his birthright, and complaints that his father's and brother's favour with his Majesty, and violent demeanour towards the persons who offered to give evidence in favour of his mother's lawful marriage, obliged him to retire from Aston, and demand redress of his grievances from the Parliament.

Under these certainly most annoying circumstances, Sir Thomas behaved with more than even his accustomed irrational fury and violence. He turned the whole tempest of his wrath on Edward for having dared to believe him guilty of the crime imputed to him, and proceeding without obtaining his consent, or seeming to hesitate for a moment in his conclusions. He refused to hear any apology, or find any in the manner he had incapacitated himself from giving or receiving explanations. And not knowing how to vent his exasperation more to his son's annoyance, declared he had no doubt what he had done was at the instigation of his low-born Puritan wife, who wanted to have himself attainted of a deed of murder and violence, in order that if her Parliament friends got the upper hand, she might manage to have his property transferred to the foolish husband she had secured.

Sir Thomas went on ragingly to declare that he was very well informed she had also had the impertinence to go prying upstairs to the apartment where he had confined his 'bewitched daughter,' who could not else have discovered—as he found she had—that her 'blacksmith' was still alive, and was guiltless of the imputations fastened on his character. But the baronet vowed, with strangely terrible oaths, that Arabella should marry Prince Rupert, or finish her days in a mad-woman's cell, which a continued refusal of so great an offer, when the witch-spell was removed, would certainly prove her to be. He concluded by ordering Edward to remove his pretended wife instantly from Aston Hall, and to bring him the pardon, that he might proceed at once to the presence of the King, and tear it to pieces then and there.

On all this bad news being announced to Dorothy, she, however, was not willing the instrument should be thus destroyed.

It is probable she suspected, from the violence of Sir Thomas's temper, that in reality he had committed the deed, which was a good deal more in his style of action than the serpentine Richard Grimsorwe's. Any way, the latter would be certain to make it appear so. She remembered the fate of the Birmingham family, and dreaded the possibility of a similar exercise of tyrannical power in the case of her husband's family. She therefore strongly advised that they should retain the pardon, although never to be produced unless the necessity should arise. And she recommended Edward to seek an audience of the King at once, explain the circumstances, and ask leave to join the vanguard of the army, which was already setting forward, to escape from the old man's unjust anger and violence, and remove her, as he ordered, from beneath his roof.

Dorothy also begged her husband to remonstrate to his Majesty the extraordinary ill-treatment suffered by his sister, under the pretence of her being mad or bewitched. And Dorothy, avowing that she had in reality made her way to Miss Holte's dismal confinement without being able to get in to see her, declared she thought it extremely probable, from her wild tone of reply, that her intellects were giving way, unless speedy rescue should arrive. Arabella, it seemed, would have it that her comforter was an angel, sent from heaven for the purpose.

Edward, justly indignant at his own and his wife's and his sister's maltreatment, complied in full with Dorothy's requests; seeking his father again, in the first instance, to urge upon him the propriety and prudence of retaining the pardon. But Sir Thomas became in a manner frantic with fury, vowed that Edward and his wife were in conspiracy with his unnatural bastard to bring his name into utter disgrace and ruin, in order to disgust the Prince Palatine with the alliance he now so generously and nobly proposed to conclude—but that he would foil the whole plot! And he rushed off to the presence of the King at once, with Grimsorwe's letter in his hand—Edward concluded, to give his version of the entire transaction.

Edward, sadly perplexed and vexed at the certain exposure and concussion that must follow, proceeded also to the King's apartment, who was engaged in giving orders to the principal officers of his army regarding the renewal of his march on London.

Nothing could, therefore, be more public than the revelations to be expected would certainly have been. But greatly to Edward's surprise, and at first to his relief, Sir Thomas made his appearance in a much calmer and tranquil manner, in company with Count O'Taafe.

But a harmful reason speedily appeared. Sir Thomas handed over the paper left by Grimsorwe open, though directed to the King, and informing his Majesty that the allegations contained were all utterly false, but that the writer having really gone over to the Parliament, in the hope to obtain his objects by its interposition, he discarded him for ever from any alliance and consanguinity with himself, *equally* with the lawful son, who should have been his heir, but for his unexampled disobedience, and degradation of the family name by marrying the daughter of a mechanic of Birmingham. Sir Thomas concluding this astounding declaration by stating that he had, in consequence, resolved to make his

daughter the sole heiress of all he possessed—every rood of his land, his house of Aston Hall, and the entire revenues attached of seven goodly manors—on condition only that she accepted the glorious alliance which his Highness the Prince Palatine Rupert had been pleased to offer to conclude with her.

Charles looked extremely surprised at this address ; but it was amply, and impetuously confirmed by Rupert, who, throwing himself on his knees, asked his royal uncle's consent to a marriage which he declared was essential to the happiness of his life !

Edward interposed, as soon as he could speak for amazement, by a passionate appeal to the King against the projected injustice and irrational severity of his father's proceedings towards himself and his good and loyal wife, who, he further irritated Sir Thomas by declaring, was of nobler descent than the Holtes themselves could pretend to be.

Charles could not but perceive how much the right of the case was with Edward Holte ; but all his maxims of public and domestic government supported the exercise of authority, however tyrannically directed. It may even be that he was not insensible to the advantages of such an establishment for his landless and exiled nephew, Sir Thomas Holte's wealth, great as it was really considered in that age, having been even greatly exaggerated to the King by those who desired to forward their master's present eager wishes and determination. Still, the ingratitude and unfairness of such a procedure struck even the Stuart Prince, and he himself remonstrated with Sir Thomas on the resolution announced, with apparent warmth and concern. Only, however, obtaining passionate reiterations of the fixity of his purpose from the baronet, until Edward put the climax on his misdemeanours by assuring the King that he was certain his sister herself would never consent to become the usurper of her brother's rights, or the wife of Prince Rupert—whom she had rejected with scorn—unless she was driven to madness by the barbarous imprisonment and ill-usage she was subjected to, from which unlawful durance he implored the King to order her immediate release, and hear the truth from the young lady's own lips, with his own ears.

In making this appeal, Edward, however, unconsciously jarred on a powerful feeling with the King.

'Refuses a Prince!—refuses my nephew! Miss Holte refuses the Prince Palatine for a husband! She must be mad indeed; and I do not take upon me to interfere in the treatment of lunatics, saving by regular course of law in my Courts of Chancery!' Charles said, with evident irritation.

'My daughter is not a lunatic, sire; but she is possessed by a witch with an extraordinary hallucination, which we shall speedily dissipate. There are means—there are means!' vociferated Sir Thomas.

'Use them, then; we shall not interfere,' the King reiterated. 'Master Holte, if what you say be true, you cannot leave your redemption from disinheritance in better charge than a woman's obstinacy on such points. I myself am content to leave the preservation of my nephew from an alliance, which is too much beneath him in some respects, to the same. But you would not, sure, attain your father of an unnatural cruelty and tyranny towards a woman, his own child?'

'There is little of which my son would not accuse me, had he any chance to be believed, sire ! My mad cook of yesterday, for example, hath been discovered to have committed suicide in a privy chamber of my house, last night ; and it wants little, perchance, that Edward Holte should accuse me of the rogue's murder to your Majesty.'

Sir Thomas Holte said this—and with extraordinary composure and credibility of manner—doubtless at the instigation of cooler and craftier heads than his own. But although Edward never dreamed for a moment of contradiction, he was horrified to think how completely the appearance of the body must refute to all beholders the possibility of *suicide*.

The King himself seemed uneasily struck by the circumstance, though he only remarked, smilingly, 'Well, Sir Thomas, you hold our pardon for that and for much more, if your loyal zeal had in reality riddled us of such a felon fanatic.' And he appeared finally to sum up his whole decision in favour of Sir Thomas's despotism by turning to Edward, and remarking, 'But we will care, in any case, Captain Holte, to see that your own services, past and future, are so amply rewarded as to indemnify you for any lost inheritance. There will be traitors' spoils enow to divide anon ; for numbers of good estate have openly joined our enemies now in the field ;' and calling to the Earl of Lindsay to resume his observations, his Majesty plainly intimated that further discussion on the subject of his host's private affairs was not to be allowed.

Utterly discomfited, and reduced to silence and despair, the only favour Edward requested was leave to set forward at once in the vanguard of the army. This permission was graciously accorded ; and, in a mood of the deepest sadness and dejection of spirits, Edward Holte rejoined his wife ; and, somewhat comforted by her unshaken courage and hopefulness, rode forth with her from his paternal mansion, on the march which the royal army resumed about midday on Monday, the 17th of October.

There was nothing else for it. Dorothy could not possibly remain at Aston Hall, under the circumstances. Birmingham, where she had suffered so much, and which was again in the hands of the frenzied Whitehall, could be no suitable residence for her. Whatever the dangers and discomforts of the campaigning life before her, there remained no resource. And, moreover, after the perils they had undergone apart, neither Edward nor his young wife could bear the notion of being again separated.

King Charles left Aston Hall very far from pleased with the main incidents that had befallen him in it, but renewing his expressions of approbation of the beauty of the situation and the magnificence of the building itself.

'Tis a regretful inheritance, truly, to lose, Falkland, as you say,' he remarked to that nobleman ; 'but disobedience in children to a father's will is almost as heinous an offence as treason in a subject, and exposes to the like penalties and forfeiture ! And it were indeed no ill endowment for a landless Prince like our obstinate nephew, who, if he set his head on anything, could not be rebutted from his career by a mountain tilting at him. However, all may end better than we think, and I will make your friend's advancement, in other ways, most specially the

object of my care. They have yet to unbewitch this girl ; and say you not some preference is alleged by her brother for another ?'

This observation was made as the King rode out of Aston Hall, duteously preceded by Sir Thomas Holte on foot, to the limits of his domains.

Lord Falkland, who always spoke up for his friend when he could, was about to reply, when a catastrophe took place which attracted attention, and marked the era of the commencement of the Civil War still more tragically at Aston Hall. And whatever expectations were formed of the Witch of Aston being persuaded or compelled to undo her supposed sorceries against Arabella Holte, it appeared, in consequence, were destined to be disappointed.

After her capture—accomplished with circumstances of great brutality by a number of the Aston rustics, who had long believed her a diabolical mischief-maker in various ways—Maud Grimsorwe was placed for security in the steeple of Aston church. This was a favourite prison-cage for persons accused of sorcery, it being thought the devil had no power to enter a church, even to the rescue of his most devoted votaries. But driven finally to despair by the consciousness of total desertion, since her grandson himself did not interfere in her favour—by remorse, and the dread of the terrible doom of persons convicted of the offences imputed to her—the wretched old woman crawled out at an opening in the belfry, believed to be too narrow for the possibility of escape. And at the very moment when the royal procession commenced its stately progress through the grand courtyard gate, and Sir Thomas Holte appeared heading it, Maud Grimsorwe threw herself headlong from the summit of the roof of Aston Church to the ground.

The idiotic old sexton, who was intended to be one of the main witnesses against her, and who was standing in the churchyard, declared afterwards that he saw the devil, in the likeness of a great black serpent, with wings, allow her to mount on his back, and then suddenly make himself as straight in the air as a stick, and let her down to the ground. Whence it was concluded that he kept some form of compact with the witch, to the letter, but broke it to the sense, as is well known to be the faithless custom of the Father of Lies. And certainly there was nothing of religious hope or trust in two strange lines which the unfortunate old woman had written with a piece of coal on the whitewashed wall of her place of captivity :

'I am going to my rest through the air,
In a way that will make the folks stare ;
When the bones of myriads fly up in a riot,
May those of Maud Grimsorwe's mother lie quiet.'

This delirious doggerel, nevertheless, supplied a piece of evidence—that the Witch of Aston, when out of the influence of her wicked grandson, did not claim for her daughter the name and status of wife to Sir Thomas Holte.

CHAPTER XCI.

CHARLES THE FIRST IN BIRMINGHAM.

A FURTHER remarkable circumstance diversified the King's progress through Birmingham, and which was attended with results of no little importance to the town.

Following on the advance of the principal masses of his army, Charles the First rode in a kind of triumphal state through the streets of Birmingham, surrounded by a brilliant escort of his principal officers. He was now arrayed, as became a king going to battle, in a complete suit of armour, with the exception that he wore a hat and feathers, the Earl of Denbigh carrying a helmet before him, decorated with the spikes of a crown. And as the entire population had swarmed out to witness the spectacle, the Birminghamers had ample opportunity to remark the displeased severity of their Sovereign's aspect, in finding himself, for the first time, amidst subjects so little disposed to render him the kind of obedience and submission he desired from all.

In fact, Charles doubtless nourished in his heart purposes of retaliation and vengeance by no means unsuspected; and, moreover, the sturdy independence of the people's character indisposed them to feign what they did not feel on the occasion. Accordingly, the King was received in almost total silence in answer to his own surly looks, or if a scanty cheer was anywhere raised, it only served the more depressingly to mark the fewness in numbers of the loyalists who thus expressed their sense.

Before the Guildhall it had, however, been arranged the King was to receive a congratulation from the authorities of the town, there being no keys, nor any other emblems of submission, to be offered belonging to it.

John-the-Rogue had proposed this, and that he himself should be the haranguer, in the expectation of receiving some special token of royal approbation for his forward zeal. But just before the arrival of Charles, he found himself unexpectedly displaced by Tubal Bromycham, who, with the now eagerly-proffered assistance of Armourer Firebrace, caused himself to be carried on a litter before the Guildhall, and informed the company assembled there that, as Lord of the Town of Birmingham, it was his duty and intention to offer the King all the proper ceremonial of reception on its part.

Tubal was still disabled from active movement by the injury to his limb, though it was now regaining power, and he continued frightfully pale with the exhaustion of the pain and fever he had suffered. But, as he was again surrounded by a strong body of the smiths, and backed by the Master Armourer, and the energy of his resolves was appreciated, John-the-Rogue and his adherents prudently waited events, and made no opposition. Whitehall nowhere appeared.

And thus it befell that, on reining up his powerful charger, King Charles found himself faced by a spectrally pale sick man, on a couch, who, raising himself with difficulty, supported by Firebrace, bade his Majesty welcome, in low, enfeebled tones, but with an eagerly excited

aspect, in the name of the town of Birmingham, as Lord thereof; and requested him to receive from his hands, as such, the customary acquittance for the manor, by touching the handle of the sword with which his ancestor, Sir William of Birmingham, had rescued Edward I. at Crecy.

And saying this, Tubal extended, with the Armourer's aid, a long, rusty, two-handled weapon, by the point, with the hilt to the monarch.

It is probable that Charles would have complied at once with what he at first took to be some mere formula of feudalism, had not Prince Rupert suddenly exclaimed, 'What! the seditious smith of Birmingham, the impudent pretender to your Majesty's dues and rights, in this town, and my own assassin assailant! Dares he to ask of your Majesty a confirming of his usurpation, and approval of his rebellion and mutiny-stirring among his townfolk here? 'Tis he, chiefly, sire, who did deny your Majesty arms for your soldiers in Birmingham, and supplied the Parliament officers with the best its forges can produce.'

'Is this so?' inquired Charles with a deadly frown.

'Nay, but it cannot be denied!' squeaked Wynkyn-the-Weasel from far behind in the shade of the Guildhall portico.

Indignation seemed suddenly to restore all his energies to Tubal.

'No, sire!' he exclaimed, in a voice that rang now very loudly and clearly forth. 'I am no usurper, but lawful heir and descendant of my ancestors, Lords of Birmingham, who were unjustly deprived of their inheritance by your predecessor, Edward VI.; which injury it is now in your royal power to repair, by acknowledging me for who I am. And traitor and assassin am I none, as I will prove body to body, and man to man, against this proud Prince, on any fair field your Majesty and all England can grant us for the trial in arms.'

'Your Majesty has heard some particulars of this case, by my transmission from Master Holte,' interposed Lord Falkland, with his usual moderation and generous feeling; 'and truly it is one which calls for some righting at your hands, to undo the wrong of your predecessor; nor could there be a fitter opportunity for exertion of your royal prerogative on the side of justice and mercy.'

'My liege, the man pretends to half the lands of Sir Thomas Holte among his forfeitures; and to my certain knowledge has treasonably appealed from your courts of justice to the Parliament; besides showing himself on all occasions an aider and abettor of Oliver Cromwell in his criminal late designs, and stirring up of insurrection in the town!' exclaimed Count O'Taaffe.

Nothing more was requisite than that name to exasperate Charles the First.

'Look to the Parliament then only, traitor! for redress of your pretended grievances. From me you shall only receive, at the earliest convenience of my laws and judges, a well-deserved halter. Forward, gentlemen.' And without deigning to listen to a word of further remonstrance, or even of the congratulatory speech which John-the-Rogue now conceived himself at liberty to deliver, King Charles the First proceeded on his way.

CHAPTER XCII.

THE BATTLE OF EDGEHILL.

It was speedily known in Birmingham, that on retiring from Aston Hall the King had left no inconsiderable garrison of some forty or fifty soldiers behind him, under the command of Cornet Titus, who was promoted by Prince Rupert's interest to a captaincy on the occasion.

To the townsfolk in general this precaution was a standing menace, knowing on what terms of ill-neighbourhood they stood with the Hall. But to Tubal Bromycham, it seemed as if specially arranged to the completion of his disaster in this unhappy love affair, and contrived to render hopeless any projects of relief he might form for the captive object of his affection.

Dorothy had not failed to report to him the barbarous maltreatment to which she had discovered Arabella Holte was subjected, from the perverse tyranny of her father, to coerce her into abandoning the man she loved for the man she disliked, and who had treated her in several respects so ill. Of course, it was no object with the wife of Edward Holte to promote Sir Thomas's object in securing himself his royal son-in-law. And now, it plainly appeared, the unhappy young lady was to remain encompassed by the myrmidons of her rough royal suitor; and it seemed doubtful whether even her high and firm nature must not yield finally to persecutions and temptations so great, or her reason itself give way.

All that could be learnt in sequence from Aston Hall justified the worst apprehensions.

Every one in Birmingham concluded, from the accounts of the state of the body, that Sir Thomas was really the murderer of his cook; and further details of his insane violence and fury came constantly to knowledge, and kept alive both indignation and dread of further ill-consequences to every one concerned.

On the other hand, Tubal's interview with the King had satisfied him that there was no hope of justice or restoration at his hands. Under all these circumstances it was not wonderful that, as he regained his wonted powers of body and mind, Tubal should form and cherish the projects which at last he plainly avowed to the sympathising Master-Armourer Firebrace.

Firebrace, it may be imagined, was as little pleased as any one with the tidings he received of his daughter's reception into her new family.

'We will restore the town to the Parliament, and clear the country of this den of military jailors and assassins, while the main body of them are elsewhere engaged,' Tubal at last openly declared; and upon that both he and his once-intended father-in-law set earnestly to work to re-organise the Parliamentary party in the town, and form the people into a militia capable of defending it, and even of proceeding to external action. The death of Sisyphus removed one great source of faction and turbulence in Birmingham, and the mass of the townsfolk being already

well inclined the way their leaders wished, began now to find themselves vexed and harassed by the royal garrison in their neighbourhood in a manner to irritate the most patient. Captain Titus, under pretence that the forges of Birmingham were devoted to the Parliamentary supplies, set his dragoons on cutting off the necessary materials of iron and coal from the Black Country.

The news which arrived shortly after of the results of the first great battle of the Civil War, contributed rather to feed the flame than slacken it.

It was on a Sunday, exactly one week after King Charles the First's visit to Aston Hall—October 23, 1642—that the armies of the King and Parliament for the first time came into conflict, in the famous valley of the Red Horse, near Keynton, in Warwickshire, and under the sharp ridges of the heights which have given their names of Edgehill to the battle.

The tidings which reached Birmingham faithfully followed the variations of the conflict itself.

It was reported, in the first place, that the King's right wing, composed of cavalry under the command of Prince Rupert, had charged the Parliament horse with such fury and impetuosity that it was utterly driven from the field, and pursued in complete disorder and rout to a distance from it. Much too far, indeed, since both victors and vanquished were thus equally removed from influencing the general decision of the field, and the Earl of Essex was enabled to advance his infantry and attack the King's, which was much inferior in number and resolution. Indeed the principal nobility and gentry disdained to serve, except on horseback, and consequently the Royalist infantry was formed of the riff-raff of the army. The King's foot was in its turn broken, and a terrible slaughter made among it. His own royal person, and those of the two boy-Princes, his sons, were for a time even in great danger, almost surrounded, as they were, by the enemy. And the Birminghams might have been proud, had not their feelings been enlisted with the opposite party, to learn that a townswoman of their own—the wife of Edward Holte, who had fearlessly ventured to the very front of the battle to watch over its issue to her husband—was instrumental in withdrawing the two young Princes safely from the disastrous scene, intrepidly undertaking the charge, and moving off with one in each hand to the neighbouring heights, where comparative safety was ensured.

At one time, in fact, the battle was supposed to be entirely lost by the Royalists, and earnest endeavours were made to induce the King to quit the field. But his obstinacy stood him in good stead on this occasion; and Prince Rupert returning with a portion of his vainly victorious Cavaliers, restored the balance of strength. But darkness coming on, both sides desisted by a kind of consent from the conflict, and passed a dreary night under arms, scattered and intermingled along the entire valley, in expectation of its renewal in the morning.

In the account of this latter portion of the action, again the people of Birmingham had cause to be proud of their Armourer's Daughter.

The story ran that Captain Edward Holte's horsemen returned from

this successful charge under Rupert without their leader, reporting that he had fallen mortally wounded in a single combat in which he had engaged with one of the fugitive officers, almost close upon Keynton. But Dorothy, distracted with grief as she was, attended by only one or two of her husband's soldiers, and furnished with a dark lantern, made her way over the entire scene of sanguinary conflict, and found Edward at length bleeding and insensible on the ground, with several fearful sword-cuts, but not dead; and contrived to bind up his wounds, and bring him back to the royal quarters in time to preserve his life.

Edward Holte continued for many months after entirely disabled for action, at Oxford, where the King ultimately fixed his head-quarters; an object of particular solicitude and attention on the part of Charles, as also was his heroic wife, though the special reasons for the royal consideration that existed as regarded Edward were not divulged until long after.

Dorothy herself was ignorant of what took place when, on the morning of the battle, the King had directed Edward Holte to be summoned to his presence.

The young captain found Charles halted on horseback, with a group of his principal superior officers, on the verge of a range of steep crags, just above the colossal sculpture in the red sandstone rocks which gives its name to the valley. But when he perceived Edward approach, he moved his horse along the cliffs, making a sign to him only to follow, until they were out of hearing of the group of officers.

These were all much surprised; but Edward himself was still more so, at the eager and excited expression of countenance with which the usually sedate and reserved King turned to him.

'Captain Holte,' Charles then said, in tones of like emotion, 'would you know that man again, deem you—that Captain Oliver Cromwell—who attempted upon my person at Nottingham?'

'Most certainly, sire; if by nothing else, by his Birmingham-made armour.'

'Look out for him, then, when you charge in the Prince's squadrons. Make him mine, alive or dead—but dead rather than alive—and there is no recompense you can ask of me I will refuse. And your father shall sooner disinherit our Crown!'

Edward, who had such heavy grievances of his own to requite on Cromwell, answered as a loyal cavalier should—'In truth, sire, I have no cause to love the man, and will do what in me lies to please you on him.'

'Swear it!' said the King, who seemed most peculiarly bent on his wishes in this respect, 'and I will give Rupert orders to leave you and your men entirely at your own discretion in the choice of antagonists.'

Edward did so; and it was in consequence of this oath that he became involved in the disaster previously mentioned, in the following manner.

The two hosts began moving towards each other about noonday, with a great rumble and rattle of artillery and musketry on both sides, which did little execution, but frequently halting to steady their lines, and keep well together. It was thus nearly a couple of hours before they came

sufficiently near to engage in the hand-to-hand conflict whereby battles were in that age chiefly decided.

Prince Rupert, observing that the Parliament cavalry was principally massed on the right wing of Essex's army, had taken the left of the King's advance with his own—intensely eager for the fray. Edward Holte was among these, earnestly searching for the enemy against whom he was specifically to direct his energies; and as he rode in the front with the Prince, he had every opportunity.

Nowhere, however, could he discern any sign of the bright armour of the Ironsides; and, in reality, Cromwell, whose qualities were early disrelished by his superiors, and who was already on bad terms with the Parliament general, had been stationed by him remote from the probable conspicuous scenes of action—a circumstance afterwards absurdly misrepresented by the Royalists as really occasioned by a cowardly remissness and hanging back by Cromwell, at the commencement of the campaigns he made so fatal for them.

On a sudden, Rupert gave the signal for the onset, shouting the words, 'The King's right, and charge, gentlemen!' and Edward's troop being mixed in the van, of course he no longer deliberated on what share to take in the movement, but dashed on with the rest.

Such was the violence and fury of Rupert's attack, that the entire left wing of the Parliament army was in a manner swept from the field in a moment, and the Prince's dragoons had the unresisted pursuit of the whole flying and scattered squadrons far and near.

It is well known how Rupert's impetuosity and insatiable ardour for slaughter and destruction transported him always, on the field of battle, into losing the advantages he gained, by following them up too far. But, of course, it was not for any subordinate officer to attempt to check the fury of the pursuit, even if Edward Holte had not shared as wildly and enthusiastically as any one in the company in the vehement sense of victory and mastery achieved.

'Kill, kill!' was Rupert's only word of command. But Edward himself was well pleased with the notion that every flourish of his sword increased the distance between his beloved wife and danger. And he was following on as recklessly as the rest in pursuit of the flying foe, when, passing a farmhouse on the roadside, he suddenly caught tones which he recognised, from a yard within a gate, exclaiming, 'Keep still, I say, son Oliver, yet awhile, till these mad Rupert's men are fairly ridden past, when, by the Lord! in spite of Essex's grizzled beard, I will try if we have not a good Lord still, and one who will keep His promise to us, by pushing between them and their King, and rending him from the midst of their sorry foot!'

It was the voice of Captain Cromwell.

Edward remembered its peculiar tones instantly, and reined up his horse at once, shouting a halt to his men; but, on looking over the poldings enclosing the farmyard, he perceived only barns and outbuildings crowded with stacks of corn and hay from the recent harvest. Nothing living appeared at the moment but a number of ducks paddling in a dirty pond.

Edward was, however, convinced, from what he had heard, that

troops were lurking concealed within, under cover, and he shouted 't discovery as loudly as he could to the galloping throngs engaged in t pursuit, forgetting, in his eagerness, that he was now himself left almo alone. But this seemed too much for the patience of the young soldi who had probably been addressed in those remembered accents, for horseman in the Firebrace steel suddenly spurred from behind a stac and dashed with uplifted sword at Edward Holte.

'Nay, father ! 'tis but one man, and of my own inches. Let me fle my maiden sword !' exclaimed the strange rider, and joined in a han to-hand conflict with Edward Holte.

It was, however, but of brief duration. Edward, perfect master his weapon, and alarmed with the conviction that he had fallen into ambush, struck a blow which inflicted a mortal wound on his antagoni.

He would then have retired for support, but was almost instant overtaken by a taller and stouter man, in similar array to the one he h overthrown, and in whose raging features he recognised—Oliver Crom well !

'Villanous cavalier, my boy is killed by you, and I will have your l in turn—Edward Holte !'

Cromwell recognised his antagonist as their swords came togethe But John-the-Rogue proved of inferior temper to the Firebrace ste and once more Edward was at the mercy of his adversary ; but this tin found none. Edward's troop, however, had now made back to l assistance, and a sharp conflict ensued, in the course of which the fan stead and all its stacks were set on fire, and Edward received the wou under which he so long after languished—doubtless, as he himself b lieved, from the hand of Cromwell, though he could never distinct remember what followed in the furious *mêlée*, till he found hims stretched on a heap of bloody straw, in the King's quarters, with h wife and one of the royal surgeons busily engaged in recalling him life from a deadly swoon.

But although Cromwell himself escaped from the vengeance aimed him, his eldest son, Oliver, a youth of the most promising marti qualities, was slain in the conflict. And who knows what great effec were not thus produced by the chance stroke of Edward Holte's swo that day ? This youth might not have proved, like his younger broth Richard, unequal to the weight of empire that fell upon him from h father's shoulders, and a Cromwell dynasty might even now be seat on the throne of England, or presiding, like the Princes of Orange, ov its commonwealth.

On the other hand, the bitterness of a bereft father's feelings mig not have mingled in the politician's calculations, and the comely head Charles the First might never have rolled upon the block by the behe of Oliver Cromwell.

CHAPTER XCIII.

ATTACK ON ASTON HALL.

THE general result of the battle of Edghill was undecisive. Both parties withdrew from the field on the following day, severely mauled, without attempting to renew the conflict. But the universal exasperation and violence of men's feelings and partisanship were necessarily roused into fiercer and wilder outbreaks; and Birmingham, above all, already profoundly agitated and stirring beneath the surface, found itself drawn into sudden action by the determination of its chiefs.

Tubal Bromycham was himself urged to more decisive and rapid movement than he had at first designed, by tidings which now for the first time reached him direct from Aston Hall. Phoebe Maythorn presented herself one morning at the Moat House, in Birmingham, weeping, and laden with disastrous tidings of the state of things at the Hall—as may be guessed, since Lady Holte herself, vanquishing the excessive timidity of her nature, and her dread of her tyrannous husband, had sent her to declare—even to Tubal Bromycham—that unless some rescue arrived speedily for her daughter, her reason, or her life, would be sacrificed to her father's obstinate cruelty.

Regardless of the realities of the case, and more excited than ever against both his sons, Sir Thomas chose to declare that the Witch of Aston's death must have broken all her spells, and, consequently, that his daughter must be, and should be, willing to marry Prince Rupert at once. And he had actually expedited a message to that effect to the Prince, and had ordered his wife to make every preparation for the nuptials, as if they were certain to take place. And yet Arabella Holte continued a solitary captive in a dismal hole in the roof of the Hall, her father assuring her constantly that she should never quit it except to marry the Prince. And to complete the strange barbarity and certainty of what was intended, the Reverend Mr. Lane had been induced by threats, and as the only means to avoid Sir Thomas's indignation for the part he had taken in his son's secret union, to promise to perform the marriage ceremony whenever called upon, and whatever reluctance might be exhibited on the bride's part. Such was the infirmity of the old clergyman's character, and his subjection to the will of his violent patron.

Matters were evidently drawing to a formidable crisis.

With regard to his sons—on the one hand, there was long reason to suppose that Edward Holte's wounds at Edghill would prove mortal, and the baronet was so fiendishly set against his daughter-in-law that he was resolved her child, if she had one, should never inherit Aston Hall; while, on the other, he had conceived a still bitterer hatred against Richard Grimsorwe, and with still more reason; for the villain had actually presented the Parliament with a petition for the redress of his pretended injuries in being deprived of what he alleged to be his rights, as legitimate eldest son of Sir Thomas Holte, and had produced as a proof the forged certificate of his mother's marriage, to which he had now daringly appended a forged signature for Adam Blackjack. And he so plausibly supported his case by declarations that Sir Thomas had

caused the destruction of the two living witnesses of the document, for no other reason but that they were so. He contrived so artfully to enlist the sympathies of the chief leaders of the Parliament against their declared and violent foe, that an ordinance of the House actually assented to the prayer of the petition, and a select committee was appointed to examine and report upon the proofs that might be laid before it by the petitioner.

Among these figured the murder of the cook by Sir Thomas Holte, though Grimsorwe affected only to urge it as a manslaughter on sudden provocation, caused by Blackjack's declaring the truth, and revealing where the certificate had been so long concealed. And he prayed that the pardon granted by the King might be produced as a confession of his father's main delinquencies, and a completion of the validity of the document he urged on consideration. And as this latter act of grace, accorded almost as a matter of course, could be quoted as a new sign of the King's indifference to public justice and monstrous system of favouritism, the Parliament readily endorsed the demand; and, although the pardon had never certainly passed the Great Seal, made the grant a portion of the charges presented against the fugitive Lord Keeper Lyttelton.

Putting all these circumstances together, Tubal had no doubt but that Sir Thomas was in a state of mind that rendered him capable of any violence to carry out the sole favourite plan that remained to him, and from which he could best hope support in his difficulties. And as after the battle of Edghill, and the King's retirement to Oxford, it seemed not unlikely that Prince Rupert would have leisure upon his hands shortly, to figure in his part in the vindictive and tyrannous transaction, Tubal, and his ally the Armourer, perceived that no time was to be lost.

Accordingly, they resolved upon an immediate attack on Aston Hall, to dislodge the royalist garrison there, and set Arabella Holte at liberty.

This garrison, under the malicious Titus's command, and by Sir Thomas's wishes and abetment, had for some time been exhibiting still worse tendencies to mischief and violence towards the inhabitants of Birmingham, besides the injury done to the staple industry of the town. And probably it would not have been found very difficult to persuade the townsfolk of the propriety of endeavouring to rid themselves of the nuisance as speedily as possible. But Tubal Bromycham now exhibited very unexpected qualities of popular oratory, and assembling the people in the market-place, he set before them so moving and impassioned a statement of the cruelties and tyranny exercised by Sir Thomas Holte, and of the perpetual misery and danger awaiting them in the presence of a Cavalier garrison at Aston Hall, that the crowded assemblage unanimously demanded to be led at once to rout out their insolent oppressors from the place.

Moreover, Whitehall, who ever since Sisypheus so audaciously contended with him, had seemed confused and strangely moping in his conduct, and had refrained from all his old vagaries, now emerged again in his old character of prophet and denouncer of woes to the royalists and their favourers. He declared that Aston Hall was doomed to be laid

level with the dust, and that the toad and serpent should ere long spawn their venomous brood in its stateliest chambers.

A better assurance, however, of this perhaps lay in the fact that Fire-brace produced Tubal Bromycham's famous cannon, confessing that he had found himself loath to destroy a noble work of art of the kind, and so had merely concealed the instrument of destruction in a disused forge-house.

Without this formidable aid, the efforts even of a greatly outnumbering multitude against the disciplined force at Aston Hall, might have proved of doubtful result. And, indeed, when the Birmingham men mustered to the number of about twelve hundred, advanced in good order to the entrance of the Park, and thence dispatched a messenger to require the immediate evacuation of the mansion and its surrender to the people of Birmingham, the frivolous and time-serving Titus seemed rather amused than otherwise by the demand.

Sir Thomas Holte and he were now very especial friends, he having persuaded the baronet that he earnestly desired to promote his royal patron's union with his daughter. And he supported the old man in his irrational plans of subduing his daughter's obstinacy, as he phrased it, with the zeal of malice and revenge.

In spite of the strange and horrifying symptoms which had begun to be exhibited by the unfortunate captive, he persisted in assuring Sir Thomas that the delirious cries and raving entreaties which were now frequently audible from the pretended madwoman's cell, were artful attempts on her part to enlist the sympathies of servants, and stupid people of that kind, and persuade a release, which would destroy all the good hitherto done.

Titus was also a great bottle companion, and he kept Sir Thomas from much interval of lone reflection by daily and nightly computations.

They were in the midst of a revel of this kind when the person sent to summon Aston Hall—Bailiff Cooper, much against his will, but it was thought a royalist would be safe on the errand—arrived.

It was a gloomy, overhanging autumn, or winter day rather, perhaps it should be called, being pretty far advanced in November, not very cold, though a faint powdering of snow had occasionally fallen that morning, and Sir Thomas and his military convivialist were seated together, at a rousing fire, in the chamber the King had occupied as the sitting-room of his suite; now in part filled by noble beginnings of a grand museum, if carried out with the spirit and goodwill evinced by the original projectors.

Sir Thomas and his friend were engaged in a strangely senseless amusement, endeavouring to out-grimace the extraordinary masks in iron-work that decorate the vast fireplace of this chamber, and occasionally toasting one another in brimming flagons of mulled sack, with bobbing crab-apples, to make the flavour pungent, in the midst.

It so happened that Titus, perhaps purposely, had peculiarly jarred on Sir Thomas's recollections by inquiring: 'What wondrously skilful, comic fellow had fancied those rare laughing visages, that looked like the figures you see in dreams, with their very souls bursting with laugh-

ter?' And Sir Thomas, gloomily pausing, had just said, 'The lamed rascal who, they tell me, is again lording it in Birmingham; and who—why the Prince hanged him not that witchcraft-night, I never could well understand!' and had fallen into a sombre rumination, when a domestic ran in, with a scared look, and announced—'A mob coming from Birmingham, your honour. And one before them to say what they mean.'

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE SIEGE OF ASTON HALL.

'THE good folks of Birmingham have bidden adieu to what little possession of their senses they have shown these latter times,' said Captain Titus, after listening pleasantly enough to the High Bailiff's confused and apologetic account of his errand. 'Are they madmen, to think that a garrison of the King's soldiers will surrender a place of any strength, and this fine place may be made of much, on the demand of a higglediggledy mob?'

'I am only a mouthpiece, and one unwilling as the tortured twist of brass on the lips of a trumpeter, that, if left to its own utterances, would but bray or bleat; not discourse all manner of valiance and assault,' replied the Bailiff. 'My wife bade me do none of it; but how can you refuse when they have you by the throat? But never was creature more choked, as it were with dust, by his own words. I would I had as much water as I could hold in a sieve to take away the thirst.'

The Bailiff desiringly eyed the drink between the two captains of Aston Hall, but neither offered him any.

'Who leads the rogues?' said Sir Thomas, after an interval of gloomy reflection. 'But there is no need to ask—Tubal Bromycham, of course.'

'The same, worshipful sir; and more bent than ever to be lord of Birmingham,' replied the Bailiff.

'What he shall never be, however,' Sir Thomas replied, with a fierce smile, 'is—husband of my daughter. I know how to remedy that.'

'Tut, we are good as long as our provisions hold out against all Birmingham can do against us,' said Captain Titus, scornfully. 'It is scarcely worth while to close the doors or the stout oak shutters, Sir Thomas; but do so while I ride out to look at these audacious fellows, and give them a taste of what is further in store for them.'

Sir Thomas nodded, but rather absently. He roused himself, however, by a seeming effort, to execute the portion of the taskwork put upon him.

In a few moments Aston Hall resounded with a clatter of warlike movement and preparation. The lower windows were hastily secured with their iron bolts and massive shutters, the doors locked, and the house servants, collecting by pre-arranged order in the hall, armed themselves as best they might from the store of weapons over the grand

mantelpiece. An alarm bell was at the same time rung from the steeple of Aston church, to summon the neighbouring farmers and villagers to render what assistance they might. But seemingly with very little effect. A deep prejudice had been excited against Sir Thomas by reports of the strangely cruel manner in which he was behaving to his children, as well as the verified facts of his career, and the belief that Adam Black-jack had fallen a victim to his violence and passion.

The greater portion of Titus's garrison was of musketeers, of a regiment commanded by Count O'Taafe. But he had also about a score of Prince Rupert's dragoons, whom he directed to mount, and placing himself at their head, while Sir Thomas busied himself with the internal arrangements, he rode forth, apparently to reconnoitre the enemy. But the owner of Aston Hall would have been little pleased if he could have seen the expression of countenance, and heard the muttered words, with which his late boon companion looked back at the stately abode as he did so.

'We will defend it long enough to get it destroyed, my good old flinger of pewter pots !' he said, stroking the scar on his forehead with the back of his hand ; 'and not long enough to hinder you from becoming the grandfather of a race of Birmingham smiths, ambitious old tyrant ! I have no cause to wish it otherwise.'

On arriving at the palings of Aston Park, within which the Birminghamers had not entered until an answer to their summons came, Titus was, however, rather surprised at the number of enemies he espied outside. Chiefly armed, it is true, with pikes and bars of iron, but drawn up in very steady and solid lines on each side of the road to the town, with a fine piece of artillery on wheels conspicuous in the rear. Tubal rode upon this, which was drawn by about a dozen of his comrades, to rest his still weak limb ; and the entire array seemed governed in its movements by his directions. For though Armourer Firebrace was present, he contented himself with carrying Tubal's standard of a smith's leather apron, gaudily painted with the arms of the Birmingham family.

It is probable, nevertheless, that Titus was rather pleased than otherwise at the strength his assailants presented, as affording him a better excuse for the conduct he meditated in the affair, in the gratification of the bitterly revengeful feelings that possessed him.

'Hillo, rascally rabblement !' he shouted over the palings ; 'where's the impudent captain of housebreakers and mechanic slaves among you who has dared to summon an officer of the King to a surrender ?'

'I am the leader of the MEN OF BIRMINGHAM, and I am here !' Tubal replied, recognising with strong distaste one of his worst assailants in his recent capture. 'But you give us the names you deserve for yourselves alone.'

'I answer your summons, then, thus, men of Birmingham, if so you call yourselves,' Titus replied. 'While two stones of its walls stand upon each other, Aston Hall shall never be yours, so begin destroying when you will !'

And with a curiously significant gesture of invitation towards the piece of artillery, Titus retired ; remarking to his horsemen as he did it,

'They are too many for an attack—it were a madness the Prince himself would not venture on. Let us return to the Hall.'

And return they did, losing thereby all the advantage of their position in the park, in the probably disorderly and interrupted advance of so undisciplined an assailing force.

But Tubal himself seemed not inclined to take the hint thrown out for his adoption. Firebrace proposed that they should unmuzzle the gun, and try its capabilities at once on Aston Hall, but he dissented.

'Aston Hall is the work chiefly of our own hands, Armourer; and a goodly one, that should become the inheritance of your descendants. We want to rid us of its ill tenantry, not to destroy the place itself,' he remarked; 'moreover, who knows when the ball is launched where it may light? And there is a head under yonder roofs which to preserve from injury methinks I could prop the skies with my shoulders! And shall I loosen stones and timbers on it?'

He gave directions instead that the park palings should be levelled, and the advance continued of the entire assailing force.

No resistance being offered, the townsfolk swarmed up the stately avenue leading from Birmingham to Aston Hall. But on approaching, they were received with a considerable change in the tune.

Sir Thomas Holte witnessed the rapid return of the dragoons with very great surprise, which he took no pains whatever to conceal.

'Never a sword—nothing but spurs—red!' he exclaimed. 'What means this, Captain Titus?'

'You will see in a moment, Sir Thomas. There is an army marching against us,' said Titus, with an appearance of consternation not altogether feigned.

'Whatever may be their number, my own servants and myself will at least make some effort to diminish them!' Sir Thomas Holte scornfully replied; and Titus—apprehensive that he was working his game too openly, or anxious to give himself an appearance of earnestness, or, in fine, willing to do what injury he could without spoiling his main views—very efficiently arranged his force for resistance.

It is on record that the first assault on Aston Hall was repulsed with considerable slaughter, though made with great courage and obstinacy.

The moment the Birminghamers, scrambling headlong over hedges and ditches, and making for the doors and windows to break them in, appeared within musket range, a murderous fire was opened upon them, and in a few moments many were severely wounded, and several killed. A cry of alarm arose, and all Tubal's efforts could not prevent the greater portion of the crowd from taking to flight. But such was his excitement and exasperation, that he leaped from his gun, and, forgetful altogether of his lamed condition, rushed about in all directions, attempting to stop the fugitives, and hindering the abandonment of the cannon, which he forced a number of the men to assist in dragging off.

He managed at last, by the most strenuous exertions, to rally the main body at the point whence they had started, on the boundaries of Aston Park. And when the first panic was over, he had nearly suc-

ceeded in inducing a portion of the fugitives to return to the assault, when on a sudden Whitehall—who had been foremost in the advance, and equally so in the retreat—yelled out, ‘Stay, stay! the Lord is not willing for an attack to-day! I have wrestled with Him in prayer, and can obtain no answer, your sins are so heavy and numerous! But until I do so, the victory cannot be to us, and your blood might deluge the whole earth in vain! So let us spend the rest of the day in fasting, and humiliation, and prayer, until a sign is granted us!’

The singular influence acquired by this frenzied enthusiast appeared most strikingly in the immediate irresolution and final desisting of the people from their more courageous resolution. Tubal himself had no sway against the ‘Angel’s’ inspired wishes; and, greatly to his indignation and concern, the Birminghamers, gathering around the prophet, assented at once to his instructions to encamp whereon they stood, and fast and pray until the Lord was induced to turn His face their way once more, and to manifest the same by some plain sign, which those who ran might read.

This circumstance afforded time for divers unlucky incidents.

After barricading his house, and witnessing the return of Titus with his dragoons, Sir Thomas had proposed that an immediate messenger should be sent to the royal head-quarters, in Oxford, for assistance, since the townfolk of Birmingham were attacking them in such force. But after the repulse, his vanity and confidence rose so high that Titus easily persuaded him there was no occasion for such an appeal. Still, he declared, it was certainly advisable to send his Highness the Prince word to come at once and remove his bride from the midst of such a hurlyburly. And if Sir Thomas exerted his paternal authority at last in a decisive manner, and compelled Mistress Holte to yield obedience, bride she must be, for there could be no doubt that the Prince would be alarmed at the approach of his rival, and willing to overlook any trifling outward signs of reluctance that might remain on the lady’s part.

Titus thus secured a renewed outbreak of the stern old man’s tyranny against his unfortunate daughter, while he guaranteed himself, as he imagined, safe from his patron’s displeasure, by seeming thus entirely unapprehensive of danger from his assailants, and desirous to promote his wishes. While he was aware that the Prince being at Lichfield, ample time was afforded him to continue a proper show of resistance, and yet bring about the other ill consequences to the Holte family his mean malice induced him to plan.

Several other untoward results followed on the delay occasioned by the repulse of the assailants of Aston Hall.

Among the rest, the very next morning, when the Birminghamers, still unable to obtain any answer to their prayers by the medium of their crazy intercessor, were still hesitating and unwilling to proceed to the attack, two most unexpected assistants arrived in their camp. These were no other than Captain Cromwell and Richard Grimsorwe, who presented themselves with an order of the Parliament appointing them conjointly Commissioners for the town and district of Birmingham, with the amplest military and civil authority.

Cromwell's merits had forced themselves into conspicuous notice at the battle of Edghill, in which his troop of dragoons was the only one that remained unbroken, and distinguished itself in covering the rout of the rest ; and his opinions had acquired much weight. Consequently he was considered fittest to manage for the Parliament in Warwickshire, and his troop was quartered for the purpose at Coventry. Grimsorwe, on the other hand, from his pretended wrongs and legal education, was deemed very suitable for the duties confided to him at Birmingham. And, moreover, in compassion for them, or in revenge against so devoted a royalist as Sir Thomas Holte had exhibited himself, powers were given to him to sequester the whole Aston Hall property, and take charge of it in the name of the Parliament, until such further redress could be granted him as he could show due, to the satisfaction of that assembly.

Neither the soldier nor the civilian, it is, however, probable, had calculated on finding the people of Birmingham already engaged in a task which was likely to render the assistance of Cromwell's dragoons necessary. He had not brought them with him then, but had merely arrived with his fellow-commissioner, to instal themselves, and consider the best means of accomplishing their other objects.

Cromwell seemed, and really was, greatly surprised at the numbers and efficient appearance of the improvised little army. But he found its general in a different mood from what he expected, when he proceeded to offer him his congratulations.

'Not much of soldiers yet, say what you will, Captain Cromwell,' said Tubal, gloomily. 'Every moment's delay is perilous to us in various ways, yet my men will not stir a foot again against Aston until I know not what miraculous encouragement is afforded us, in answer to our minister's prayers. And he has been praying as uselessly as hammering cold iron, all yesterday, and part to-day, for a sign !'

'Hath he so ?' replied Cromwell thoughtfully. 'But is it quite certain a sign ought to be granted us ? Know you what force is assembled at Aston Hall ?'

Tubal replied, 'About forty soldiers, under Captain Titus, and some score servingmen, gamekeepers and the like, with Sir Thomas Holte.'

'Is this well assured ?' Cromwell rejoined.

'Most certain. There is a man here from the place—one Gaspar Feldon—who had either been enforced against his will to serve, or has some secret grudge of his own, and came over to us last night, and reckons them at so many, and no more,' Tubal replied.

'Why, then, of a surety we are in numbers enough for the work, and to spare, if we could depend better to day than yesterday upon such unseasoned soldiery !' replied Cromwell ; but on a sudden his eye fell upon the piece of artillery, and brightened up like a flash of steel in the sun. 'What is yonder ?' he exclaimed. 'A culverin ? Will it discharge ? Good Lord ! what further sign can men require than such a first-rate piece of deadly workmanship as this ?'

And he examined the instrument with great delight, while Tubal, with a maker's natural pride, exhibited the power and finish of his manufacture.

Grimsorwe, whose reception in his new and influential quality had not been very brilliant on the part of Tubal or Firebrace, nevertheless followed his coadjutor closely about, and now made the saturnine observation, 'Expound so much at once to the good folks, and let us proceed to work, Master Cromwell,' when on a sudden he started and turned pale.

'What ails you, Master Grimsorwe? Does the mere yawn of the empty mouth of destruction affright you?' said Cromwell, who was pretty well aware of his coadjutor's lack of physical courage.

'Not so! But how came my brother Edward's Sutton gamekeeper among you here? What, honest Gaspar! have you also turned to the other side?' Richard said, looking at a sturdily-built man, who stood, gun in hand, apparently on guard over the artillery.

'I knew not that it was yours, sir, or likely to be,' the man replied, with gloomy discomfiture, and averting his eyes.

'You should make much of this man, Captain Cromwell,' said Grimsorwe, in a patronising tone, and evidently trying to conciliate the speaker; 'he is the best marksman in the Midland, and was always esteemed so on Sutton Chase. Has Edward Holte turned you from his service, my good Gaspar? And will you now believe that he scandalled me to you in warning you concerning your good housewife and me?'

'I believe now, as always, Master Grimsorwe,' replied the Sutton keeper, in tones of even deepened gloom, and still keeping his eyes off the impudent seducer, 'in my own eyes.'

'Believe what you will, then; but were I Master Bromycham, or the captain here, I would have no such traitors and renegades in my camp!' returned Grimsorwe, with spiteful vehemence.

'What are you yourself, Master Grimsorwe, if it be true you are of Sir Thomas Holte's begetting?' the same stern, unaltered tones rejoined.

Grimsorwe turned scornfully away, while Cromwell burst into a hoarse laugh. 'Fairly answered, Master Grimsorwe!' he said. 'But now let us to our main business. We will assault Aston, and at once, with this well-made tube. But first, to satisfy these honest, prayerful creatures how fitting it is we should. Where is Master Whitehall? I have some say with him, I know.'

He moved on with the other parties to this dialogue towards a group of people collected round the 'Angel,' who, from the top of a barrel, was vehemently uttering the words, followed in chorus by the crowd, 'O Lord! good Lord! best Lord! heavenly Lord! give us a sign, a sign, a sign, whereby to know if we shall proceed in this business or not! A sign, a sign, a sign, good Lord!'

'Here is one,' said Cromwell, stepping forward, and bringing Grimsorwe with him. 'Lo, the end is at hand, when the son is armed against the father; and it is Master Grimsorwe who proposes we should all march at once to take Aston Hall from the Cavaliers!'

'I have full authority, sirs—positive instructions—to receive Aston Hall and its belongings into my own keeping, in the Parliament's name,' said Grimsorwe, unabashed at the wondering, and by no means approving, gaze people directed on him.

Whitehall would not, however, accept this sign.

'It is nothing,' he said. 'Lo, I myself have refused to acknowledge my wife and children, who have trudged painfully hither, on foot, to see me, from London, after being denied their presence and comforting for eleven mortal years of captivity! But this is much—this is all! I know and believe thou, Oliver, art the man appointed by God to do this work, and under your leadership I bid the people march to victory!'

The shouts of the assembly ratified the declaration of their minister; and Cromwell took upon himself the position at once which his rank and new commission in the Parliament's service entitled him to assume. And, indeed, the singular ascendancy he exercised indisposed Tubal himself to any opposition to his rule.

Preparations were accordingly at once resumed for action, and the Birminghamers once more invaded Aston Park, stimulated by a hope of vengeance also, now.

Meanwhile, Gaspar Feldon had deserted his place by the cannon, after a short but profoundly sombre interval of reflection.

'He witnesses that I am a good marksman!' he then muttered to himself; 'and *traitor* and *renegade* will I no longer continue where he also is one! It is not murder to slay an enemy in open warfare; and cowardly as he is, I may have some chance at his heart while he watches how his errand speeds in the assault on Aston Hall! No one knows yet there where I have been. I will return!'

And shouldering his gun, with a dark smile, the injured husband of Esther Feldon stole from his guard, and creeping unobservedly along the park palings, soon re-entered the enclosure, and made the best of his way back to whence he had come.

CHAPTER XCV.

THE SURRENDER OF ASTON HALL.

SIR THOMAS, we know, had not concealed his surprise at the easy manner in which the commanding officer of his garrison abandoned the outer limits of his charge. But as nothing unfavourable seemed to happen in consequence, greatly to the surprise of both himself and Titus, he made no further commentary.

Next day, however, the case was altered, when Gaspar Feldon returned, and declaring that he had accidentally been made prisoner, and had afterwards effected his escape from the slight guard kept upon him, astounded Sir Thomas by the information of the presence of Richard Grimsorwe, and his pretensions, in the assailing force, which he declared was on the way to resume the attack on the Hall.

In his exasperation, Sir Thomas actually cursed his wicked son. 'God requite him,' he said, 'and fulfil the curse I utter on him! God visit on him the anguish he has planted in my heart, and all his wickedness! The murderous villain! for he, and he only, killed Adam Blackjack the cook!'

‘Was it really so, Sir Thomas Holte?’ inquired Caspar Feldon, with a strange earnestness.

There was something in the man’s manner that powerfully arrested Sir Thomas’s attention.

‘As my soul lives, it was so!’ he exclaimed. ‘You may believe as much, good fellow, of a man who has boasted in open companies a thousand times, how welcome your demure wife ever made him at Sutton Manor House.

‘I do believe that Richard Grimsorwe is the murderer of Adam Blackjack, Sir Thomas Holte! And *blood for blood!*—it is written in the law!’

And Feldon, who was an Anabaptist of the school of Sisyphus the bellows-blower, ground his teeth audibly together, and retired.

The renewal of an attack, previously repulsed with so little difficulty, did not alarm Sir Thomas, who was ignorant of the Birminghamers’ possession of a piece of heavy artillery, and that the assailing force was now under the direction of the great military genius of the times. But he began to be impatient for the arrival of Prince Rupert, having at last, as he considered, overcome his unfortunate daughter’s reluctance to the glorious match he was bent on forcing upon her.

Titus’s truly diabolical ingenuity had suggested a means which, after every other excess of coercion and cruelty had failed, seemed to succeed.

Under his inspirations Sir Thomas explained the noise of musketry, and of the assault on Aston Hall, which necessarily reached up even to the solitary chamber in its roof where Arabella Holte was a captive, as an attempt on the part of her lover, Tubal, and his townfolk to effect her rescue. The subsequent silence, he declared, probably enough, confessed their defeat and dispersion. But he coupled this with a false statement—that the pretended Lord of Birmingham was made prisoner in the assault, and that the next discharge of musketry she heard would announce he had met a nobler death than any traitor rebel could deserve!

Arabella’s terrible anguish—her wild outcries for mercy on her unfortunate hero-lover—would have moved the compassion of the most ruthless hearts, not dominated by the relentlessly exasperated feelings that possessed Sir Thomas. His own calamities had made him utterly insensible, instead of softening him, to the miseries of others! The barbarous old man having lent ear to Titus’s suggestions that he had only to remove the object of preference to dispose his daughter to obedience to his will in favour of the Prince—in the midst of Arabella’s entreaties, a rattle of musketry from the courtyard below reached her ears, purposely discharged by the captain, and which Sir Thomas exultingly declared to announce the slaughter of the insolent mechanic pretender to her hand!

Sir Thomas himself descended from the Dark Chamber shortly afterwards, with a scared and troubled look.

Nevertheless the news he signified, as the result of their manœuvre, to Titus, seemed all well enough.

After a brief explosion, to be naturally expected, of the wildest agony

and despair, his daughter lent attention to his renewed arguments to induce her to accept the royal husband he was resolved she should, since his rival was now for ever removed.

'And you were right, Titus,' Sir Thomas concluded with but a dismal smile, nevertheless, 'no woman pushes her folly so far as to persist in her constancy to a *dead man*! And Arabella has consented at last to receive the Prince as her husband, as soon as he arrives for the purpose, in order to secure her own withdrawal from a situation of so much gloom and terror.'

Titus gave a long whistle, vulgarly enough—but also stared astoundedly at Sir Thomas.

Recovering himself, however, with some effort, he took unbounded credit for the cleverness of the move which had effected this desirable result, demanded of Sir Thomas if he did not now believe and confess that he understood women; yet concluded by advising that no relaxation of the young lady's captivity should take place until the arrival of the Prince, and the effecting of the marriage should prevent the possibility of any retreat or evasion from the extorted consent.

The former event might speedily be expected, Sir Thomas having despatched a confidential message to Prince Rupert, at Lichfield, with an invitation to that effect. He allowed himself again to be governed by his artful counsellor, who, on his own part, was not less annoyed than surprised at the result of his vengeful advice, Sir Thomas admitting that his daughter had implored him in the most pathetic manner to be suffered to leave her darksome and narrow chamber, now that she could not by possibility be retained there on any motive for her good.

Titus conceived himself again most thoroughly foiled by his own contrivances; but luckily, as he deemed it, the Birmingham people renewed the siege of Aston Hall, and he still imagined he saw a way to the execution of his secret plans.

This idea was strengthened when it was found that heavy artillery was brought against the house; to the amazement of the garrison, and more especially of Sir Thomas Holte.

The destruction of the baronet's noble palace seemed menaced, and went more heavily to his heart than any other calamity had power. But Captain Titus, on his part, was not prepared for the form which his passionate affection for the work of so long a period of his life took in Sir Thomas Holte. The old Cavalier declared that he would no longer remain shut up in the walls of Aston Hall by a dastardly mob, that kept at a distance from all reprisals, but whether the Captain lent his assistance or not, would sally forth, at the head of his own domestics, and take the destructive weapon they had in some unknown manner obtained, from them.

Nevertheless, on reflection Titus probably considered that he could make use of this violent resolution to effect his own objects, under colourable pretexs. He therefore seemed to agree to the demand; and a muster for a sally was held, of the entire strength of the garrison, in the courtyard of the mansion.

Fighting under cover, the numbers of the garrison of Aston Hall had as yet only been diminished by a few wounded men. But it must be

confessed that when they assembled in the open air, the seventy or eighty soldiers and servants, comprising the garrison, presented but a very disproportionate figure to attack the little army of upwards of twelve hundred, which Cromwell and Tubal Bromycham had drawn up, in a most advantageous position, along the edge of a range of uplands, towards the town.

Titus calculated on the effect of this visible disproportion in numbers, and he also purposely divided off Sir Thomas's domestics for a flank attack while he charged the Birminghamers in front.

His soldiers from the first showed evident symptoms of feeling themselves overmatched; and when the attack was made Titus speedily took occasion to withdraw from it, leaving Sir Thomas Holte exposed to a general assault.

In fact, observing the soldiers retire, Cromwell ordered an advance from his own lines, under the leadership of Tubal Bromycham. The hot-blooded baronet, rushing to the attack with his usual fury and impetuosity, suddenly found himself and his men surrounded by a swarm of assailants.

In a few moments Sir Thomas was completely enveloped, nearly a dozen of his people knocked down or killed, and he himself was speedily overpowered and crushed to the ground by a flooding in of his enemies, resembling the downpour of a cataract.

No sooner was Sir Thomas's much-disliked person recognised than half a score of pikes seemed set all at once at his breast. But a powerful figure suddenly interposed, and in a manner gathering the weapons into shining sheaves, pushed them back.

'Let no man harm Sir Thomas Holte. He is my prisoner, and as such is safe. On your lives, none touch him.'

It was Tubal Bromycham, who, speaking thus, bestrode the fallen body of his oppressor, and protected him thus, at no little hazard to himself personally, in the fury and whirl of the onset. But Tubal's authority, in action, was always paramount, and no one dared to offer it any disobedience.

Sir Thomas himself was too stunned and injured to offer any further resistance. He was raised and carried, rather than led, into the rear of the Birmingham position, where Cromwell sat on the stump of an old tree, watching the progress of the skirmish, attended, much against his mind, by Richard Grimsorwe.

Firebrace was also at hand, standing leaning on Tubal's standard, which he insisted always on bearing, though he consented not to expose his age and exhausted strength in any personal effort.

'Who is this white-bearded prisoner?' said Cromwell to Grimsorwe. 'And why does he glare so fiercely at you?'

'He is my father, though he has seldom behaved to me as one; the choleric old man who killed his cook because dinner was not ready at one o'clock,' Grimsorwe replied.

'You lie, bastard! It was your own treacherous hand only!' Sir Thomas mustered spirit enough to reply, exhausted as he was. 'And I have this day received a mercy from my belligerent foe, which the man who professes to be my son would never have shown me!'

'Why did you not as I advised, Captain Cromwell, and order *no quarter* should be given?' Grimsorwe exclaimed, livid with fury at his father's words.

'Because, my good fellow, I wished to spare you the guilt of a parricide. A fratricide you are already in your heart,' Cromwell replied, unable to conceal his disgust.

'Whatever else I am, I trust in a few moments more to sit master and lord in Aston Hall, if the Parliament decrees have any force,' Grimsorwe rejoined, with a fiendish laugh.

'Of a truth, you have writings with you to that effect, Master Grimsorwe; yet there's many a slip 'tween the cup and the lip, you wot well,' Cromwell replied, though probably without affixing any very specific meaning to his own words.

'Nay, Captain Cromwell,' Grimsorwe sharply answered him, 'for I should say you have had enough of contravening the orders of your superiors. And for my own part, I am a civilian, and shall not put myself in the way of the calamities to which your swordsmen are liable.'

'My curse will yet, however, I hope, overtake you, unnatural calumniator and betrayer!' Sir Thomas said; and precisely indeed, as he uttered the words, a bullet, sped from some distant but unerring aim, struck Grimsorwe in the very middle of the forehead, and scattered his brains in all directions around him as he fell.

Sir Thomas Holte's own ruthless pride and ambition were destined to receive also a fitting chastisement.

Continuing to head his victorious townfolk, Tubal Bromycham arrived almost as soon as Titus and his flying soldiers at Aston Hall. The Captain had time, however, to retreat into the house, and bar the doors. A few minutes after a drum beat for a surrender, and a white flag was displayed at one of the windows of the Great Gallery over the hall.

Tubal desired nothing better than a pretence to spare the work, chiefly of his own genius and toil, and he entered into terms for a surrender at once.

These were of the easiest description, Titus stipulating only that he and his men should be allowed to retire in peace and safety from their stronghold.

By this time Cromwell had come up, holding a great key in his hand. He gave it to Tubal.

'Sir Thomas has implored me to interfere to save his daughter, whom he has left locked in an upper chamber of the mansion; but I cannot, methinks, appoint a milder deputy,' he exclaimed, with a significant smile. 'It is true he will have it Miss Holte has consented to marry her savage Prince; in which case, Master Bromycham, have nothing more to say to so worthless a coquette, but let her take the chance of Sir Thomas's other goods, which I have given up to plunder to Faithful Moggs and the whole rabblement of the town.'

Tubal glanced at the key, recognised it, uttered not another word, but rushed into the house, sped up flight after flight of the grand staircase, until at last he reached the darksome summit of the principal dome tower. Another instant and his key was in the door of the Dark Chamber. He called a name—he shouted it—'Arabella! dearest, dearest Arabella!'

No voice responded.

He burst rather than opened the door.

For a moment the thick gloom prevented any object from being visible. Then he groped forward, widely extending his arms. Only a moment. Suddenly Tubal then espied a gleam of terrible eyes, resembling those of a tigress. A spring resembling that of a tigress, also, from a couchant position, was made at him ; and it was Arabella's clutch, resembling the clawing of a tigress, that circled his neck, while Arabella's accents yelled forth the mad but fearful words, 'You have killed my Tubal, devilish Prince ; but I have only consented to be yours to kill you—and—and—thus !'

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE MARRIAGE OF TUBAL AND ARABELLA.

IT cannot be said that Tubal Bromycham was altogether grieved, horrified as he was by his maniacal reception, to find how completely his royal rival was now detested by Arabella Holte ; since it was clear, from the dreadful clutch she fixed upon him, that she purposed Rupert's destruction to avenge his own supposed doom.

Had her strength been equal to her will, she would probably have accomplished it. As it was, it was only with great difficulty Tubal could remove the strangling grasp from his throat, and recover breath to repeat his exclamation, in accents which at last Arabella seemed to recognise. Then, uttering a fearful shriek, she sank lifeless in his arms, in a deadly swoon.

Tubal immediately bore her down a flight of stairs into the light, encountering Cromwell and Captain Titus on the way, who, engaged below on the terms of surrender, were alarmed by the outcry, and rushed up.

But, alas ! when the unfortunate young lady was restored to her physical senses, her intellectual faculties seemed for ever to have deserted her.

It is true she recognised Tubal, but only as the ghost of himself. Nothing could disabuse her fancy from the certainty that he had been killed by her father's orders ; and she continued to address to him the most moving and passionate supplications for pardon for the injuries she had done to him, and for being the cause of his woful fate.

In vain Tubal almost raved in his assurance that he was living and well : it seemed impossible to restore her to any species of sane perception on this point.

What to do with her under these deplorable circumstances became the difficulty.

Her mother, Lady Holte, had disappeared. It was ascertained that Sir Thomas, having discovered his wife's attempts to bring some rescue for her unhappy child, had sent her away to Hagley, on a pretended purpose of apologising for the misconduct of his son, Edward. Phoebe Maythorn, who had been obliged to conceal herself from Sir Thomas's

wrath—Heaven and Robin the Falconer only knew where—emerged from her hiding-place with the intelligence. The faithful girl hazarded the dangers of the rifled mansion to hasten to the assistance of her young mistress.

Neither the unhappy young lady herself nor Tubal Bromycham could bear the notion of her being restored to her tyrant father's care. Cromwell proposed this, after announcing his intention of sending Sir Thomas immediately a prisoner to London. 'Her mind is in all probability for ever crushed,' he exclaimed, with more emotion than was usual with him; 'and it is fitting that the grim destroyer thereof should be condemned to the contemplation of his own work. But for you, Tubal, I should have given no quarter to the father of the slayer of my own best issue. But he must not altogether escape punishment.'

'There is little fear of that,' said Titus, with malicious exultation quivering on his features. 'Yet Heaven forbid,' he continued, in a way that in reality suggested what he seemed to deprecate, 'that Master Bromycham should revenge himself so signally on the Prince—my kind master—who once purposed to hang him like a common felon on a tree—as to use the rights of war and possess himself, at all events, of the person of this beauteous madwoman, for good and aye.'

'Wretched scoundrel!' Tubal replied, eyeing the treacherous captain with scorching scorn in his glance, 'these words prove of what you are yourself capable: and but that terms of surrender have been granted, you should, more certainly than I escaped it, have disgraced a gibbet with your worthless weight. The only alternative that remains, Master Cromwell,' he concluded, addressing that commander with marks of the strongest emotion—'the only favourable means that remain to me of dedicating my existence to the restoration of my unhappy lady to love and reason—if it exists in possibility—will be to make her *my wife*, and remove her at once from this scene of disaster and confusion to a more quiet abode in Birmingham, and the careful attendance of good Dame Cooper, who is always willing to aid faithful love. Where is Chaplain Lane, who did the like sanctifying office between Dorothy Firebrace and Edward Holte? Let him be sought, and make, at least, this beauteous ruin mine, if ruin it must remain.'

'There could not be a more substantial way of proving yourself no apparition, certainly,' sneered Titus, 'though I do not suppose Mistress Holte will hesitate to accept so beloved a spirit as a husband. But I warn you, the Prince's indignation will be kindled to a fury that will involve all concerned in peril, and the severest chastisements in his power to inflict.'

This *warning* was accepted as it was doubtless intended it should be, as a new inducement to proceed in what it was pretended to deprecate. And Chaplain Lane having at this moment opportunely turned up from a place of concealment in which he had been discovered, and dragged in a prisoner by Faithful Moggs, was glad to purchase protection, and an assurance of release, by consenting to what was required of him.

As for Arabella herself, she assented with delirious joy to a ceremonial which was to unite her inseparably and for evermore to the society of

her beloved and wronged Angel of Redemption—so she now styled and evidently considered Tubal Bromycham.

This second surprising and unlooked-for marriage was therefore solemnised without further delay—or at least with as much solemnity as the circumstances of the times allowed. And while the noise and uproar of the triumphant invasion filled every chamber and cellar of Aston Hall, the unfortunate and yet not altogether unhappy lovers were made man and wife.

Tubal immediately after removed his bride from the scene of tumult and agitation to quieter quarters in his own residence at the Moat House in Birmingham.

Here she was received with the greatest kindness by Dame Cooper ; and medical assistance having been procured, a powerful sedative was administered, under whose action Arabella sank into a deep slumber, which seemed to promise good results for her over-wrought and anguish-stricken brain.

CHAPTER XCVII.

THE STORMING OF BIRMINGHAM.

FROM that time Tubal appeared to take no further interest or concern in aught that occurred away from the couch of the beautiful invalid, whose slumber deepened into a stupor that lasted for several days.

The apothecary (there were hardly any mediciners of higher standing, in provincial towns, in those days) assured him that a crisis was maturing under this outward insensibility, which would either be entirely destructive, or as completely restorative, to the health and reason of the patient. And Tubal watched in indescribable anxiety and dread for the awakening—for the decisive moment which would either seal him for ever the melancholy keeper of a lunatic, or the happy husband of an adored and beautiful bride.

Meanwhile, there was a sorrowful satisfaction in the conviction that, whether for good or evil, that peerless idol of his young love—that wonder of beauty and excelling symmetry, which had fascinated his artist imagination from earliest years—was now his, and his alone.

No insolent rival, no overbearing Prince, would exult in the possession of that divine loveliness, and revel not less in the misery and deprivation of her cheated true love than in his own success. Arabella Holte was henceforth and for ever his. His wife ! No calamity seemed altogether unendurable with this sweetness of consolation in the draught.

And thus absorbed in his self-imposed taskwork of love and devotion, Tubal took no heed of external events, until the consideration was forced upon him. And while Cromwell, untrammelled either by colleagues or opposition, displayed his singular administrative qualities, with extraordinary vigour and success, in reducing Birmingham to the government of the Parliament, he who was its proper lord and ruler interfered in no way in the matter. But Tubal was aroused suddenly and fearfully from his lethargy of expectant love.

Aston Hall had been sacked of nearly all its furniture and valuables ; little more than the outside structure remained after it had been plundered by the victorious mob of Birmingham. Totally unpitied, and with not an effort made in any quarter on his behalf, Sir Thomas Holte had been forwarded as a prisoner of state to London ! Cromwell's troop of Ironsides had arrived and established themselves as a garrison in the town ; when, on the third day after the surrender of the hall, that leader presented himself at the Moat House, evidently somewhat shaken in his own perpendicular.

Threatening intelligence had arrived.

The tidings of the outbreak of the Birminghamers, uniting with his private mortification, seemed to have provoked Prince Rupert to an extraordinary effort at vengeance ; and if the reports could be credited, he was now marching on the town with a regular little army of two thousand men and artillery, vowing to lay it level with the ground if any resistance was offered to the fulfilment of his Majesty's orders. And these orders were to take possession of Birmingham, and put all the leaders of the revolt to an ignominious death on the gallows !

So at least a lad, who had escaped from their ranks, touched with horror at the profane and licentious courses he witnessed among the Royal troops—one Jack Bunyan—had brought word to Birmingham. And it was believed this reporter had only got the start by a very few hours of the assailing force.

Under these circumstances, the Parliament Captain and Commissioner came to consult with Tubal on what could be done to encounter or avoid the perils menacing the whole town and themselves.

'I have not yet taken counsel with the Lord in prayer, for I love first to know what human means may be in the hands of men, as touching whatever can be effected by human agencies ; which is no great matter, unless the Lord shows His hand in the work,' said Cromwell, with his usual cloudiness and ambiguity of expression. 'But, as regarding the good people of this town, I am myself of opinion the onset threatened is more than we can withstand ; being altogether of seasoned and accustomed soldiers, well provided of military means. And for my own part, I would have all such as have any reason to apprehend the violence threatened to retire with me and my troop on Coventry, which is a town of defence, and which I have taken some poor pains, under the Lord, to make, as it were, a stronghold and rock for his people in all these parts to flee unto and find shelter. But the good man, Whitehall, who hath been received as a prophet and messenger of good tidings in this town (and indeed the poor soul preaches very comforting and savoury doctrine, whiles, when we have time to attend to him), *he* will have it that we shall not give back but one step from our enemies, but rather that a tremendous manifestation is at hand which shall utterly confound and abash them. So that, although by mere human reckoning, we are not in any potency to meet and baffle the designs of our enemies, yet, truly, if we show a becoming confidence in the Lord, He will show Himself as good a God as ever He did to His people Israel, even on that day when He commanded the sun to stand still over the valley of Jehoshaphat !'

'Whitehall is right !' replied Tubal, passionately. 'It were death

and final overthrow of her once so bright and lovely wit, to awaken my hapless wife and drag her in a wild hurryscurry from her quiet couch to Coventry. God will stand by us, if we stand by ourselves ! Moreover, did I not say to the proud Prince that I would prove myself no traitor, no assassin, my body against his, wherever we could meet ? I will not budge a step from amid my people ; but if they will rally around my apron and defend the town, so will I to the last drainings of my blood !

‘Tis manfully spoken, but I know your acts will outdo your words, Tubal Bromycham !’ said Cromwell, with evidently kindled enthusiasm on his own part. ‘Neither know I of a surety but that the man, Whitehall, speaks of some superior ordination. At times he appears to me as a madman ; at others, as if the will of God spake in his utterances. He it was the first who knew and believed in me ; yea, and declared it to the people—what I have long known and felt in myself—that I am a man marked out for the accomplishment of great matters of the Lord, by the way, as one may say, of the strong arm of the flesh. Also, so noble a standing forth and defiance of the superior force and fury of the enemy will greatly hearten men everywhere to brave resistances, and the tidings thereof will resound through the land, and put the people in a good way to show themselves men for the cities of their God, and the chief resting-places of the ark at this present time. He who defends Birmingham well may earn himself a call to do the like for London ; where whoever shows himself the most skilled in any trade or mystery may command the markets of the realm. And I shall see to it, moreover, that in the case of the worst, my men and I have a good retreat assured to us to Coventry or Warwick town ! which therefore knowing, it is for you of Birmingham, who cannot readily escape if once you bide the fray, to determine whether you will enter upon it or no.’

Tubal reflected for some minutes profoundly.

‘This is the end of it !’ he then exclaimed. ‘Let those who are afraid of the issue avoid the town forthwith ; we who are determined on a brave defence of the same will offer them no obstruction. Let us assemble an open meeting of the townsfolk in the market-place for this declaration ; and meanwhile do you, Master Cromwell, lay out the plans of our defence as masterly as you did erewhile when first the bloodthirsty German came to our assault.’

It was done as Tubal had said.

The alarm-bells of St. Martin and the summons of the town-crier speedily assembled a crowd of nearly all the inhabitants of Birmingham at the Bull Ring, including every shade and variety of political and religious opinion and feeling prevalent among them. Firebrace, Whitehall, John-the-Rogue, Faithful Moggs, Bailiff Cooper, Mistress Mellons of the Black Boy and Woolpack, workmen at all the trades, Anabaptists, what not ? swarmed out into the streets, and made for this common rendezvous.

Tubal was in readiness, and in a few brief but powerful sentences expounded to the people of Birmingham their position, the near approach of a Cavalier army, bent on slaughter and destruction, the means of defence at their disposal, and the probability that God Himself would interfere on behalf of an injured and oppressed community of men who

feared and honoured His name ; and he concluded by stating, as he had stated to Cromwell, that, for his own part, he was determined to remain in the town, and live or die in a brave attempt to deliver it from the furious malice of its enemies.

The greater portion of the assemblage received this announcement with uproarious signs of adhesion and acceptance. The idea of retiring *en masse* from their homes and homesteads, comfortless as many of them might be, was exceedingly distasteful to the populace in general, and that was the only means of safety which seemed assured them from the overwhelming advance of their enemies. But the Royalist opposition had also gathered courage from the rumoured approach of their allies, and John-the-Rogue, for almost the first time, ventured to present himself openly in opposition to the wishes of the democratic leaders of the town.

‘Hear me, good people!’ he called out, at the pitch of his shrill treble voice. ‘It is very fine indeed for those who have ropes around their necks, to require of us to put ourselves into a similar ill condition. But I would have you know that the most part of us may be quit of any danger from this pretended raging Cavalier army, by merely giving up our own tyrants and oppressors as the traitors and perturbers of the public peace they are. I promise you, on the faith of my body, which is in your hands, that you have only to yield up some half-a-score turbulent fellows of this community, to purchase exemption and pardon for all the rest. Anywise, it is madness to talk of resisting the powerful army marching against us, under the fierce Prince Rupert ; and I, for one, if my counsel is not taken, will leave the town with all my goods, to shun the destruction which, most certain it is, otherwise awaits it.’

It is not unlikely that these observations might have produced some considerable effect, but that Whitehall now presented himself to the public attention, in one of his most inspired moods of frenzied excitement.

‘Hearken, men of Birmingham!’ he shouted. ‘No man whatsoever shall be suffered to leave this town until he has witnessed the full manifestation of the mercy of the Lord, and chosen his part with Him or against Him. For the Hour of the Kingdom is closely at hand, and within a brief time all who look upon me here shall witness the stupendous miracles by which it shall be revealed truly WHO AND WHAT I am, to the belief of the most worldly-blinded and incredulous!’

‘O Flotsam, Flotsam! Jacob Flotsam! will you still refuse to own yourself your poor wife’s husband and your poor children’s father?’ cried a female voice, in sobbing accents, from the crowd—the original of the sorrowful Pilgrimess Christiana, of the future immortal writer, who at the moment stood at her side, a fugitive deserter, known to a few, and unhonoured by all.

For a moment the prophet looked in some degree affected by the appeal. But his terrific lunacy speedily regained its empire in his mind, and he burst into an harangue, in which he strenuously disavowed all human connections and copartnery, and all but announced himself to be the predicted Divine Ruler of the world for a thousand years.

But whether Whitehall’s own insane imagination was affrighted by the tremendous nature of the pretension, and needed support ; or that,

with the instinct of his disease, he strove to conceal the very core and essence of its internal workings, he contented himself by declaring that if their enemies outnumbered the sands on the sea-shore, they should be scattered before them like chaff before the wind ; and the visible doer and performer of this mightiness could no longer be doubted, or mistaken, to be the announced Restorer and Reigner over the faithful of Christ until the end of Time and the Millennium.

The curiosity, the fanaticism, the hopes of the people were universally and vehemently excited by this appeal and these promises ; and not only was it now determined to defend the town against its enemies, but that no one should be suffered to retire from it, or shirk his share in the common efforts necessary for its preservation.

Such was the resolution of an overwhelming majority, and preparations were immediately set on foot. Once more Cromwell appeared as the intrepid and sagacious leader, who was ultimately destined to attain the military supremacy of the entire nation, and a very brief period sufficed to place Birmingham in no despicable condition of fortified defence. The majority of the people worked with a will ; but the entire body of the townsfolk were compelled to engage in the task, whether with or against their inclinations.

Accordingly, when Prince Rupert, burning for revenge of the various accumulated wrongs of which he conceived himself to be the victim, arrived, at his most rapid and reckless rate of marching, early on the following day, he found the old barricades and ditches ready for his reception in the circuit of the town, and Cromwell with his Ironsides, and the principal part of the inhabitants capable of bearing arms, assembled on a spot still called Camp Hill, at the foot of Deritend—ready, as it appeared, to give him open battle.

Surprising as it may seem, the greatest and most general faith was placed in the assurances of miraculous aid constantly proffered by the insane Kingdom-Come Apostle. And though it was impossible for the defenders of the position not to perceive that they were frightfully outnumbered, and by a military array of a most formidable and imposing aspect, no signs of dismay or diffidence appeared in their ranks.

Count O'Taafe presented himself with a white flag, and found the Birminghamers engaged in chanting the favourite hymn of the puritan religionists, formerly placed on record in these chapters :

'God is our strength,' etc., etc.

The message the Count brought amounted in the sum to what has been previously declared. He bore a summons to command the town of Birmingham immediately to surrender to the forces of the King, upon promise of his Majesty's pardon and protection to all but the leaders in the revolt and infamous attack on, and dispersion of, the royal garrison at Aston Hall, under penalties of being given up to fire and pillage, and general slaughter, from end to end.

It was Tubal Bromycham who, by universal assent and approbation, answered himself as the representative of the town, and in its name refused all submission or treaty.

'For yourself, audacious mechanic, I marvel little, for your fate is well assured, if we can find a gibbet strong enough !' Count O'Taafe

replied ; and spitefully raising his voice to the highest pitch, he called out, 'But on the other hand, good people, if you will give up this one traitor alone, and the unhappy young lady he has basely ravished from her home and friends, I do believe the Prince may be induced to show mercy to all the rest.'

An uproar of refusal responded to the demand ; and O'Taafe, willing enough to take an answer which entitled the town to the severities such commanders as himself most desired to inflict, bowed scornfully, and retired to his own array.

But now, unhappily, there commenced no slight difference of opinion among the leaders of the defenders of Birmingham.

Whitehall insisted that the whole body of them should rush forth from their defences, and overwhelm the Egyptians, even as the Lord overwhelmed Pharaoh and his host, of old times, with the waters of the Red Sea. But Cromwell, on a wiser calculation of probabilities, declared that they should await an assault from their enemies where they were, posted on the side of a hill, which, sloping off sharply in all directions, and enclosed by a strong stockade he had caused to be erected, offered great resources for defence.

'Tis a hot-headed fellow this Rupert, who calls himself Prince Palatine, and is wild with anger, too. He will make one of his mad-bull rushes at us anon, and we shall be sure to spy some vantage. Moreover, simple man ! see you not that being chiefly horsemen, they will break in upon us in spite of my few troopers, if once we leave the shelter of our palings and ditches ! Let them attack us, and we may baffle the onset. I will not be a sharer in any other design.'

'Is the Lord a mighty Lord only when the spearmen and the chariots outnumber on His side?' returned Whitehall. 'Generation of unbelievers still ! Come with me, and ye shall see that I will wither them off the face of the land with the very breath of my nostrils !'

'You can do it as well, then, from this place of vantage, Master Whitehall,' replied the more matter-of-fact commander. 'A miracle is one equally at hand or at a distance ; yea, and we should have the more leisure for observation and certainty if we never stir our stumps. Destroy the enemy from before our faces, then, but ask not me and my five-score riders to run amuck against these thousands advancing on us—for advance they do.'

In fact, during this conversation, the attack had commenced, and it was necessary to reply to the heavy firing now opened upon the defenders of Camp Hill.

Tubal's cannon took an important part in the transaction, and for a long time nothing was audible but the deep boom of its discharges, and the constant rattle of the smaller pieces, in every direction surrounding the enclosure of the hill where Cromwell had so judiciously stationed his main defence.

In truth, the people of Birmingham, now pretty well seasoned in arms, might possibly have sustained the attack with success, had they continued to observe the judicious plans of their leader ; but the treachery of John-the-Rogue, and the madness of Whitehall, combined to defeat his efforts.

Sudden but rapidly diffused intelligence arrived that the former personage had thrown open one of the main entrances of the town, in the direction of Long Bridge, and that the Prince's cavalry was pouring into it from that quarter. Upon this, Whitehall declared that the hour of salvation and complete redemption had arrived for all who would follow him, and that the Lord had only deserted them because they showed no confidence in His promises. The fanaticism of a considerable portion of the defenders then became ungovernable, and they rushed like a Bedlam let loose from their entrenchments, in a headlong charge on the baffled portion of the enemy still facing them.

Tubal himself, recognising Prince Rupert before him, could not resist the impetus of his own feelings, and headed the disorderly onset; Cromwell, however, would not be hurried or seduced from his calmer and matured resolves. 'If a miracle is to be wrought, they are enow, for a thistledown blown by the breath of the Lord would suffice!' he remarked, with sarcastic anger. 'But no, I must do what in me lies to cover the retreat, and save the faithful handful confided to my charge, and such others as will answer to check and spur still.'

The result was what might reasonably have been expected. In a few minutes the entire mass of the assailing townsfolk of Birmingham, at least those who survived the reception that awaited them, came scudding back in the wildest confusion and disorder, pursued by the Cavaliers, who were flourishing their swords, yelling and shouting all manner of derisive defiance and summonses to the fugitives to make their bold words good and stand to the fight.

Cromwell, perceiving he should be entangled in the general rout, directed a retreat of his own troopers into the town. But as this retreat was severely pressed on by the multitude as well as their pursuers, it speedily partook not a little also of the character of a flight.

Cromwell himself was personally in great danger; having put his horse to the gallop in the rear of his Ironsides, ordering them to pass through the town, and leave it to its now decided fate, he was nearly overtaken by a dashing cavalier, who headed the Royalist charge, at a spot in Shirland Lane. But Cromwell, with characteristic audacity and suddenness of resolve, turned upon him, pistol in hand, fired it, and rid himself of his pursuer. None other than William Fielding, Earl of Denbigh, whom we have seen so gay and high-spirited in attendance on the King, at Nottingham and Aston Hall.

The fates of the other leaders of the onset were various.

Tubal Bromycham was for some time reported to be a prisoner. He was last seen in the conflict penetrating the thickest ranks of the Cavaliers, laying about him with a massive pole-axe. But on the general rout and confusion of his party, he also seemed to share the panic, though in reality actuated by a motive altogether apart from anything personal, and fled into the town along the still open passage preserved until the Ironsides also took flight.

As for Whitehall, an authentic account declared that, sharing the general downbreak, he fled as far as the Old Crown House, and took refuge with a crowd of other fugitives in the forge-yard. Here Firebrace, however, vehemently reproaching him with cowardice and im-

posture, the unhappy lunatic ravingly announced that he had only made the experiment of men's faith so far, by suffering the disaster incurred, but that he was in reality himself the MESSIAS RETURNED, and would now at once proceed to exhibit his divine powers.

And by this outburst of frenzy he prevailed upon a number of the people to stand by him, and close the gates of the yard, which he declared should be even stronger than adamant against all assault, until he was throned, crowned, and robed as King, when he would issue forth and destroy all unbelievers, whether friends or foes, by actual lightning from his eyes. In the midst of which mad discourse Count O'Taafe arrived at the head of a body of pursuers, and having speedily caused the gates to be burst open, ordered all within to be put indiscriminately to the sword. The lunatic prophet dashing forward, with doubtless a terrific glare in his eyes, but not the destructive flames that were to issue thence, in defence of his people, was immediately cut down and killed, after a frightful mangling; while his companions partly shared his fate, and partly escaped by the most desperate efforts, a good number being drowned in the Rea behind the Old Crown buildings.

Among the rest, it was afterwards known, Armourer Firebrace was preserved, though special search was made for him, by letting himself down his own well in the bucket, which descended with his weight at a frightful speed, but where he was not suspected to have taken refuge, and so escaped the general slaughter.

But our concern is chiefly now with Tubal Bromycham, who, separating himself with difficulty from the stream of yelling fugitives, hastened at his utmost speed to the Moat House.

'There may yet be time to save her!' he muttered frequently to himself. 'And the barbarian who would have forced himself into her arms will shortly have every atrocity in his power. In vain I laboured to reach him. Even her total destruction would be better than to suffer her to fall into his hands.'

To Tubal's surprise and great increase of alarm, he found the old building entirely deserted by those he had left in charge of the beloved invalid. The Coopers, with a very natural regard for their own safety, had hurried away, to endeavour, by an exhibition of their loyal principles, to avoid being involved in the general calamities of their townsmen.

Consequently, Arabella had been left alone, apparently in the last stage of her stupor, on her sick couch.

Mounting to her apartment, however, Tubal found her sitting upright, and listening with an expression of wonder, which was yet of a rational terror and questioning, on her still beautiful, though now most singularly pallid and wasted countenance.

'Tubal!' she exclaimed, as the heroic lover rushed to her side, 'Tubal, is it indeed you? What uproar is all this? Have I not dreamed the amazing fancy that returns now so vividly upon me—that I am married to you—my only true and faithful love! and even by my father's chaplain, worthy Master Lane?'

'It is all true, my beloved wife, though without your cruel father's consent, who kept you captive as a madwoman, because he was him-

self mad. You are mine and I am yours, henceforth and for ever ! You have suffered greatly, but, thank God, your reason seems restored ! You are in Birmingham, in my house ! But it is no longer possible we can remain here. Rupert has attacked us with an overwhelming force ; but we may yet have time to fly from his vengeance and lust, if you will make an effort to rise, and let me carry you forth.'

'Nay, I am exhausted, I am too weak, dearest Tubal. Death is assured to me, in any case. But save yourself, and leave me to my fate, whatever it must needs be. I have deserved the worst by my inconstancy and ingratitude to the bravest and best of men.'

'Leave you in the midst of a town taken by assault, by the savage Rupert, all whose worst passions are leagued to inflict the most unimaginable injuries and cruelty on the wife of Tubal Bromycham ? No, dearest Arabella ! rather will I die a thousand deaths. But Bull Street is yet unoccupied by the enemy. I feel a giant's strength in such a cause, and I can bear you in my arms through the midst of every danger to some exit from the town.'

'What ! with that maimed and wounded limb !—maimed through my wickedness and folly,' Arabella exclaimed. 'And look, besides, dearest Tubal, look ! Bull Street is in flames.'

It was even so. Rupert, exasperated with the resistance he had encountered, and willing to allow himself every licence in the pursuit of vengeance, abandoned the town entirely to the violence and brutality of his soldiery, without restraint or remorse.

A horrid slaughter was made among the unresisting inhabitants, most part of those saved only escaping by flight from the town, and covering the highways in all directions with lamenting throngs.

Quite an indiscriminate destruction of persons and things followed, John-the-Rogue's house and work-premises being amongst the first given to the flames ; while he and his son Wynkyn, and Bailiff Cooper and his wife, and other royalists found their claims as such completely ignored, and themselves exposed as much as any one else to the maltreatment experienced by the rest of the townsfolk of Birmingham.

It was through the flaming ruins of a considerable part of the town that Count O'Taafe, especially commissioned for the purpose, rode with a select body of dragoons to the Moat House of Birmingham, and formed a complete investment of its watery rampart. Terrified for his own safety, Bailiff Cooper had betrayed all the circumstances of Arabella's position there, and instructed O'Taafe in the means to secure her capture.

And now to return. Startled by his unhappy bride's exclamation, and the ruddy glow of flames which glared over the chamber, Tubal sprang forward, drew open the lattice casement, and looked forth. He was instantly welcomed with a rattle of musketry, and perceived that the house and its moat were completely surrounded.

At the same time a voice, whose infuriated accents he recognised to be those of Prince Rupert, yelled from a body of cavalry massed near one of the raised drawbridges, 'Vile mechanic ! surrender your treacherous siren, and submit yourself to the rope, before I lay this house level about both your ears with your own cannon.'

In reality, Tubal's masterpiece in arms had been captured, and now figured in array with the rest of his overwhelming of enemies, on the further side of the drawbridge in front of the house.

He turned. Supernatural love struggled with supernatural anguish and despair in his expression.

'You hear, my loved, my lost one!' he exclaimed. 'All is over for me; it is impossible I can escape the vengeance of my merciless rival. But my destruction frees you for ever from all bonds, all engagements, all suspicion of preference for another—and you may yet become the bride of a Prince. One farewell embrace—one last embrace, sole hope and happiness of an existence that but for you had been all blank! and I will offer myself without further struggle as the target of these thousand levelled carbines that circle me in.'

'And can you believe—even after all I have done to betray the ambition and vanity of my Holte blood—that I can prove so mean and worthless a creature still?' Arabella replied. 'No, dearest Tubal! my lover and my husband! dearer to me than ever were either before to woman! it is impossible I could outlive the doom to which I have brought you, and therefore I will die with you! Yes, my husband!' she concluded with a glorious smile, lustrous at once with the passion and power of her exalted though awhile erring spirit, 'we will cheat death of all his bitterness by perishing together, and in each other's arms. No other means remains for the wife of the last Lord of Birmingham to pass undishonoured to her grave by his side. Let us die together! Support my steps, or I will crawl after you, to the moat-side, and hand-in-hand we will plunge into its depths, and thenceforth defy the malice and power of our enemies to separate us any more.'

Every argument and entreaty were vainly exhausted by Tubal, in his love and sorrow, to prevail upon Arabella to venture on her chances of preservation after his own destruction had glutted the rage of their enemies. To meaner minds and hearts, incapable of great emotions, it may appear that the delirium induced by her long solitary confinement and sufferings still worked in the heroic woman's brain, and prompted her resolve. Spirits more akin will better comprehend that it was the only decision that remained for such a one to take compatible with its heroic impulses and purposes. And they will even understand how at last, unable to refuse himself so supreme a triumph and release from the most terrible of his sorrows and fears in yielding to the fate that compassed him, Tubal Bromycham consented to his beloved bride's decree.

Yet no power of language could do justice to the unutterable anguish mingled with the unutterable joy—with which Tubal finally clasped the idol of his brave and loving heart in a last embrace, and with his own arm still wreathed around her, supported her forth with himself to their doom.

Strangely enough, however, Arabella seemed to have regained all the strength and stately grace of her accustomed manner as she stepped forth with her husband from the Moat House, right in front of the cannon, which was now in full preparation to be discharged,—doubtless with the determination on the part of the barbarous assailants, either to

compel a surrender on the part of Tubal to a more ignominious fate, or batter down the old mansion of his ancestors over his head.

Rupert and his slaughtering host, now concentrated thickly round the edge of the moat, and attentively watching for the result, beheld two figures emerge from the ancient manor-house of the lords of Birmingham, closely linked arm-in-arm.

Immediately recognising in the glare of the burning town around, that one of these was the lame hero-smith, whom he so much detested, the Prince would have given orders to destroy him at once by a discharge of musketry, had he not also discerned that his closely linked companion was Arabella Holte.

'The dastard !' he yelled ; 'does he think to save himself from my just vengeance thus ? He but spares himself for the gallows !'

To the life-long horror and saddening of this ferocious soldier, however, the pair, reaching the verge of the moat, waved him a species of scornful greeting and farewell, and then turning, clasped each other in their arms, and flung themselves together into the deep, dark water of the moat !

So willingly did both these unfortunate lovers consent to death, that neither rose for several minutes, and when they did it was as corpses, still closely clasped in each other's arms.

And thus perished the last Lord of Birmingham and his bride of Aston Hall ; emblems, let us hope, of a happier future indissoluble union between the town of Tubal Bromycham and the noble palace which his genius chiefly had adorned.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THERE is not much to be said of a more cheering character concerning the subsequent fortunes of the Holte family, for a long interval of time.

Sir Thomas continued a prisoner, and his estate in sequestration, by order of the Parliament, for a very considerable period : until, in fact, the complete triumph of the Parliament cause being assured by the destruction of the monarchy, and beheading of Charles the First, he was admitted to what was called a composition for his property, by the influence of his son's wife and family with Oliver Cromwell. But such was the relentless stubbornness of his animosities, that he still constantly refused to be reconciled to her or Edward Holte during the remainder of his life. He would, indeed, have disinherited his son, but that he found himself childless and heirless of all issue besides ; and Charles the First most positively prohibited this act of vengeance, and refused to sanction any transfer of his faithful adherent's birthright. While, on her part, Dorothy Firebrace blessed her husband with a numerous and flourishing progeny, which promised a long continuance to the race.

Twice afterwards did the influence of the Firebrace family preserve the Holte property from total confiscation, in consequence of the reck-

less obstinacy with which Sir Thomas joined in various royalist plots and insurrections. Heavy fines and forfeitures were, however, imposed, that greatly limited his powers of mischief against the new Government, and which he made the pretence of refusing all but the scantiest means of subsistence to his son and his family.

Luckily Firebrace's resources, ungrudgingly dedicated to the purpose, preserved his daughter and son-in-law from the severer straits to which they might otherwise have been reduced.

There is an obscure tradition that Sir Thomas Holte survived his son, dying himself a very aged man towards the close of the Protectorate. But we have ascertained that this report is unfounded, and merely based on the facts that Edward Holte retired abroad with his family, on the destruction of royalty in England, rather than expose himself to the resentment of the father of the young soldier he had slain at Edghill, when he became supreme in the State. And abroad he resided for several years, amusing his exile with various literary and scientific pursuits, and also devoting much time and research to tracing and verifying the proofs of his wife's descent from an ancient and noble French family; the results afterwards figuring memorably in the statement of the Holte pedigree.

But though we do not allege that Edward Holte attained anything like the years of his violent but stronger-constituted progenitor, there can be no doubt that he lived to be restored to the Aston Hall estates, and to reside there for a long period in peace and prosperity, and to see his children properly acknowledged as his heirs.

A manuscript journal, undeniably in the small, timid handwriting of Chaplain Lane, still more tremulous with age, attests the fact.

An entry in it declares that on the 25th of June, in the year of his blessed Majesty King Charles the Second's restoration, Sir Edward Holte and my Lady Dorothy, his fair wife, and their three sons, specially naming 'Master Charles,' the eldest, did return to their house of Aston Hall, from a long and painful exile abroad, and were received with unbounded joy and wassail by all the tenantry thereof. And, moreover, a great number of the townfolk of Birmingham, being most willing, after the long troubles and disturbances, to live in good peace and neighbourhood with the Holte family, did accompany the Master Armourer, Firebrace, of Deritend (verily, then, a most aged and wrinkled, but very happy man), on the occasion, to welcome Sir Edward home. And there was a great feast and revel made and kept on the occasion, with all the old merry sports and junketings disused of a long time, under the direction of the Master Falconer, Robin, and his jolly wife, Phœbe. And that the only sadness he, Master Chaplain Lane, heard or remarked on any one's part, was when my Lady Dorothy inquired of her father whether he was careful to keep the tomb he had erected to the memories of her dear unhappy foster-brother, Tubal Bromycham, and his noble wife, her husband's sister, in the Church of St. Martin, always in good refreshment and repair. Whereupon there was scarcely a dry eye among all who overheard the question, it was put so lovingly and sorrowfully.

There are a few subsequent entries, referring to minor vexations endured by Sir Edward Holte and his brave wife in their subsequent career. Prominent among which was the harassment they sustained from the rapacious designs of one of the mistresses of the restored King, who wanted to have it shown that Sir Thomas Holte had incurred forfeiture of his goods by felony, as the murderer of his cook, which at that distance of time it might have been very difficult to disprove; the woman herself having a greedy eye to a fine on a release from the 'extreme penalties' of the same. And then was seen the benefit of my Lady Dorothy's former wise resolve to retain the pardon granted by King Charles the First; for it was produced, and put an effectual stop to the whole nefarious proceeding. Not to mention that, for almost the only time in his life, Charles the Second recalled an obligation with gratitude, in the fact that in his boyhood he had been indebted to Lady Holte's courage and presence of mind for withdrawing himself and his younger brother from the dangers of the field at Edghill, and forbade that any further scrutiny should be made into the circumstances.

It is, perhaps, scarcely necessary to dwell on such trifles at the close of the recital of so many serious misfortunes and calamities. For, on the whole, indeed, many cloudless years of love and happiness were in store for the union of Sir Edward Holte of Aston Hall, with the Armourer's Daughter of Birmingham.

THE END.



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